



## Supreme Court of Illinois

August 18, 2020

### **FREE LEGAL ANSWERS FOR CIVIL APPEALS COMING TO ILLINOIS**

Starting September 1, self-represented litigants in Illinois can submit a question online about their civil appeal and receive an answer from a pro bono lawyer with the launch of Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals, the first-ever legal help desk for appeals in Illinois. The program was created to address the pressing need to provide help to self-represented litigants (SRLs), who account for 41% of civil appeals filed in the state.

Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals will operate through the American Bar Association's (ABA) Free Legal Answers platform, which is administered in Illinois by the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI). This initiative is a unique partnership between PILI, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission), the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC), and an Illinois Appellate Legal Answers Advisory Committee, which is comprised of a variety of legal stakeholders throughout the state.

"The creation of a statewide virtual help desk for civil appeals is a vital and timely resource. This initiative will not only fill a much-needed gap in appellate resources and assistance for SRLs, it will also help lessen some of the barriers they face in understanding the requirements necessary to complete their appeal," Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice Anne M. Burke said. "The Supreme Court looks forward to the successful launch of this program in Illinois and is grateful to PILI, the ATJ Commission, and the AOIC for its efforts."

Low-income litigants with a civil appeal can submit their questions to a lawyer through the [website](#) (no phone calls or in-person meetings, and the attorney will not represent the SRL in their appeal). The platform is open to both appellants and appellees. In order to expedite a response, they should attach a copy of any applicable final orders or judgments relating to their case. All questions will be answered by volunteer lawyers through the website. The litigant and lawyer can exchange messages back and forth until the litigant has the information they need to move forward with their appeal.

"We are proud of this partnership in developing this new and much-needed resource for self-represented Illinoisans in civil appeals," said Michael Bergmann, Executive Director of PILI. "Thanks to the ABA, the Free Legal Answers platform is available to help those who likely have nowhere else to turn for assistance from a lawyer."

Litigants qualify for the program by answering income questions on the website, signing a user agreement, creating a username and password, and posting their question by providing facts

about their civil appeal. Lower-income Illinoisans may submit up to 5 legal questions per year after qualifying.

“True access to justice requires meaningful appellate review,” said Josh Vincent, a Partner at Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP and a member of the Advisory Committee for the project. “This program will help SRLs successfully navigate the procedural aspects of the appellate process so that their cases can be decided on the merits.”

To qualify, the user must have household income below 250% of the federal poverty line, have less than \$10,000 in assets, not be incarcerated, be at least 18 years old, have a civil legal question (not a criminal appeal), and not be represented by a lawyer.

The program also presents a pro bono opportunity for attorneys to utilize their experiences to help self-represented litigants in civil appeals. The program is currently recruiting volunteer attorneys with appellate experience. To sign-up, attorneys should complete the registration [form](#) on PILI’s website or contact Brent Page, Senior Managing Attorney, at 312-832-5128 or [bpage@pili.org](mailto:bpage@pili.org).

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**(FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: Kathryn Hensley, J.D., Senior Program Manager, at [khensley@illinoiscourts.gov](mailto:khensley@illinoiscourts.gov).) or visit Illinois Free Legal Answers for Civil Appeals at <https://il.freelegalanswers.org/>)**