

Request for Proposals Court Navigator Network Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator Grants 2020-2021

Background Information

Thousands of litigants appear in the Illinois civil courts without a lawyer every year. The growing number of self-represented litigants (SRLs) in court is not unique to any one circuit, county, or case type. However, the vast majority of SRLs do not choose to represent themselves. Most would prefer legal representation but are unable to find or afford a lawyer. The growing number of SRLs—many who have little or no prior experience with the judicial system—poses challenges for clerks, judges, and other court staff. And the litigants themselves face many obstacles.

Further, no one anticipated the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the court system. Access to the courts must be maintained and the availability of services pre-pandemic should continue at the same or a higher level as needs grow. With in-person support for SRLs now limited, courts must evaluate how to provide self-help services when the courthouses or self-help centers are closed or when operations are limited. Even when a new delivery model is developed, it is critical to also evaluate how to communicate to the public that services are available and how to access them. Outreach strategies are particularly critical at a time when more people than ever find themselves in need of information and guidance on COVID-related legal issues ranging from tenants' and creditors' rights to unemployment law.

To address these particular challenges, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) and the Access to Justice Division of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC) will prioritize grant applications that seek to establish or redesign programs to serve SRLs in light of the pandemic. We recognize that appropriate responses to the pandemic may differ court to court and that local partners will be critical to fully understand and address the needs of the SRL population caused by the pandemic and changes to court operations. Projects could include telephone or online chat services, online-dispute resolution options, developing Guide & File automated interviews to complete forms and seamlessly e-file, helping SRLs with appearing remotely for court dates, outreach campaigns about changes to court operations, mailing of information packets, or providing safe and socially distant in-person services to name a few. A portion of grant funds can also supplement the salary of the designated Coordinator. See Section III, Budget Narrative on page 6 for more information.

A foremost concern is the health and safety of court staff and patrons. Those staff that join this network will collaboratively and creatively work to identify new strategies for improving access to justice while maintaining health and safety.



Program Overview

The goal of this project is to create, train, and support a statewide Court Navigator Network (Network) of clerks and court staff based in courthouses throughout the state. Network members serve as a bridge, linking their courthouses with others throughout the state to share ideas, develop new resources, and establish programs for assisting SRLs, perhaps through additional and new methods because of COVID-19. Over the past few years, the base of this Network has been the Illinois JusticeCorps program and the Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator (Coordinator) grant program. However, our goal is to expand the Network and have at least one member in every Judicial Circuit in the state this year. By doing so, we will fulfill a major goal of the Illinois Judicial Conference's strategic plan.

Established under the 2017-2020 ATJ Commission Strategic Plan, the Coordinator grant program served over 50,000 court users in its first two years. Utilizing grant funds, Coordinators developed innovative projects, which ranged from repurposing courthouse space for help desks and improving signage materials to creating early resolution programs that resolve divorce cases more quickly. Coordinators received in-person and remote trainings throughout the grant year, addressing topics such as information vs. legal advice, making referrals, customer service, implicit bias, assisting people who are dealing with mental illness, plain language, user-centered design, communication/de-escalation, and working with court users who have low literacy levels. You can read more about the previous grantees in *Illinois Courts Connect* newsletters for [November 2017](#), [November 2018](#), and [December 2019](#).

Courts may apply to participate in the Network for the training and collaboration segment only or courts may also apply for Coordinator grant funds (up to \$20,000) to cover expenses related to the development, modification, or expansion of resources and services for SRLs. If a grant application is submitted on behalf of a Circuit with multiple counties, please indicate which counties will be served on the application form provided below in Section I. Multiple applications may be submitted by a jurisdiction, but that District's or Circuit's maximum awards cannot exceed \$20,000 total.

Requirements & Expectations

A Network member may be any person working at a courthouse in Illinois who has a demonstrated knowledge of the challenges faced by SRLs and familiarity with court operations and the legal community. This includes staff or personnel in the offices of chief or presiding judges; circuit clerks; appellate clerks; court law libraries; self-help centers, or other relevant courthouse staff. Network members should have strong problem-solving and customer service skills, and the ability to work both independently and with others.

All members of the Network, whether receiving SRL Coordinator grant funds or not are expected to:

- Participate in orientation (in-person or virtual) and ongoing training via monthly teleconferences on relevant topics;
- Cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate with Network members;
- Determine the best way to communicate, maintain effective relationships, and share information and resources with staff throughout the jurisdiction and across departments (e.g.,

- circuit clerk's office, chief judge's office, law libraries, interpreters, probation, etc.) and submit a written copy of a communication plan to the ATJ Commission;
- Post ATJ Commission/AOIC signage and informational materials throughout the courthouse(s) such as fee/assessment waiver sign, forms, interpreter, and e-filing manuals;
 - Determine the need of the District's or Circuit's courthouse(s) for any other brochures, referral sheets, or navigational signage and work with the ATJ Commission and other Network members to fulfill those needs. Regularly assess and maintain sufficient numbers of resources;
 - Create community outreach plans for how to disseminate information outside the courthouse walls;
 - Provide one-on-one legal information and referrals to SRLs as appropriate;
 - Arrange ATJ training for the court staff in the jurisdiction;
 - Conduct court patron surveys at least twice per year in the jurisdiction's courthouse(s) and share the results with the ATJ Commission to provide data for further program assessment;
 - Complete a self-assessment for each courthouse in the jurisdiction that the member represents when requested, but at least at the beginning and end of the program year;
 - Partner with the ATJ Commission, AOIC, and Network members to identify statewide needs and emerging trends and to collaborate on larger scale solutions;
 - Secure a replacement representative from the jurisdiction if the original member is unable to continue work as a Network member; and
 - Complete the requisite program agreements and meet any additional responsibilities of the Illinois JusticeCorps program or Self-Represented Litigant Coordinator grant program, if applicable.

Each SRL Coordinator grant recipient must also participate in the following required activities:

- Create, modify, and update self-help resources for the courthouse;
- Evaluate self-help services and resources to determine their effectiveness;
- Solicit ongoing feedback from litigants, judges, clerks, and other court staff about the effectiveness of self-help resources and programs;
- Track individuals served by the Coordinator and report data to the AOIC;
- Submit quarterly updates to the AOIC about activities and grant expenditures;
- Identify new program needs (e.g., mediation, remote appearances, dedicated *pro se* calls); and
- Develop new partnerships with community organizations (e.g., bar association *pro bono* programs, volunteer greeters, public libraries, social service providers);

This list is not exhaustive but is meant to give some general guidance to the Coordinators. Each Coordinator's time will be used differently depending on both local priorities and needs and the level of resources currently available in the courthouse. This work is dynamic and will change over time as community and courthouse needs evolve, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coordinator will be instrumental not just in creating and implementing new resources, but in monitoring existing ones to make sure they continue to be accurate and effective.

Each grant will be for a one-year period from August 1, 2020-July 31, 2021. During the grant period, each recipient will be expected to take steps towards developing a sustainable path forward to keep the service level consistent at the conclusion of the grant.

Decision Process

Applications are due by **July 15, 2020**. All award decisions will be made by the ATJ Commission's SRL Coordinator Selection Committee. The Committee will review all grant applications and make awards based on several criteria including demonstrated need, local support, ability to work collaboratively, and willingness to innovate and think creatively. The committee anticipates that the grant recipients will be announced on July 31, 2020 with grant monies to be disbursed shortly thereafter.

Grant Proposal Requirements

Each proposal for grant funds must include the following five components:

- Section I Application Form (see below)
- Section II Program Narrative (1000 word maximum)
- Section III Budget Narrative
- Section IV Statement of Interest (500 word maximum) & Resume
- Section V Letters of Support

More information on each section is provided below.

Completed grant applications must be submitted before 5:00 pm on July 15, 2020 by email to Jill Roberts, Supervising Senior Program Manager, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov.

Network Membership Only

Anyone who is interested in joining the Court Navigator Network solely for training and collaboration and without submitting a full proposal for grant funds should submit Section I by email to Jill Roberts Supervising Senior Program Manager, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov before 5:00pm on July 15, 2020.

Questions about the RFP or overall Court Navigator Network should be directed to Jill Roberts Supervising Senior Program Manager, Access to Justice Division, AOIC at jroberts@illinoiscourts.gov. We can brainstorm, discuss proposal ideas, and provide support with the application process.

Section I – Application Form Court Navigator Network 2020-2021

Applicant Jurisdiction Information

Judicial Circuit/Appellate Dist.	
County (if multiple counties in the circuit, please list each one that will be served by Member)	
Chief Judge/Presiding Justice	
Presiding Judge (if applicable)	
Circuit/Appellate Clerk Name	

Court Navigator Network Member Information (if requesting grant funds, this is the Coordinator who will attend trainings, oversee the grant project, and report to the ATJ Commission and AOIC)

Name			
Job Title			
Employer			
Street Address			
City, State, Zip Code			
Phone Number		Email Address	
Request	<input type="checkbox"/> Grant funds & network membership <input type="checkbox"/> Network only*		
Are you interested in participating in the Court Navigator Network even if you are not awarded any grant funds?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		

* If you are requesting to participating in the network without requesting grant funds, you only need to complete this section of the application.

Additional Contact Information (if additional staff members should be included on communication about the Network, please include their information here. If additional space needed, please submit on an additional page)

Name			
Job Title			
Employer			
Street Address			
City, State, Zip Code			
Phone Number		Email Address	

Section II - Program Narrative (1000 word maximum)

The program narrative should be structured to contain answers the following questions:

- a) **What is your proposed project or program?** Please describe the project or program for which you are requesting grant funds.¹
- b) **How does this project address the self-help needs of court patrons based on the COVID-19 pandemic?**
 - i. Please describe your county's specific needs for assisting SRLs in the current climate and foreseeable future. Include information about any current programs and available court-based and local services designed to address the needs of SRLs and how the grant funds can support, expand, or modify the existing work in this area.
 - ii. Please describe any technologies that may be used to provide assistance remotely as well as any safety precautions to provide socially distant in-person services.
- c) **What are your goals for the project or program?** Please list specific objectives and any steps that will be taken to achieve them. This should include any specific tasks or policies that will be put in place to achieve the objectives and a description of any desired outcomes (e.g., specific materials or programs).
- d) **Who will partner with your Coordinator to achieve these goals?** Please describe any proposed partnerships that will enhance the work of the Coordinator. This should include court-based partners (e.g., circuit clerks, law librarians, Illinois JusticeCorps) and external partners (e.g., bar associations, legal and social service providers, public libraries).
- e) **How will the Coordinator evaluate the effectiveness of their work?** Please include a plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the Coordinator's initiatives and any other self-help resources that are currently available. Evaluations should consider the impact on both litigants and court staff.
- f) ***For current grant fund recipients only, if applying for additional funding for your current project:*** Please describe any steps you have taken towards developing a sustainable path forward for your current project and the reason for needing additional grant funds.

¹ If your proposal is for an Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) program, please be advised that there is an additional application process through the AOIC that you will have to complete prior to launching the ODR program. All ODR grant recipients must commit to completing this separate application process and more information will be provided with grant award decisions. For questions about the ODR AOIC approval process, please contact Sarah Song at ssong@illinoiscourts.gov. Additionally, a separate ODR Request for Proposals is issued concurrently with this RFP to support the development of ODR programs exclusively. You can seek funds to develop an ODR program under either grant program but not both. Stated another way, the same jurisdiction cannot receive SRL Coordinator grant funds and ODR grant funds for the same ODR project. The same jurisdiction can receive SRL Coordinator funds for a non-ODR project and ODR grant funds for an ODR project.

Section III – Budget Narrative (500 word maximum)

Please provide a budget narrative explaining (1) how much grant money the applicant is requesting (up to \$20,000) and (2) how the grant money will be spent. The grant money should not primarily cover the Coordinator's salary but may be used to maintain current staffing that would otherwise be threatened due to budget shortfalls because of the pandemic. The funds would ideally be used to cover expenses related to programmatic needs like resource development and training (e.g., printing, events), to creating an appropriate work space (e.g., signs, computing equipment, minor renovations), or for technology innovations (e.g., ODR or online chat services).

Section IV – Statement of Interest (500 word maximum) & Resume/Biography

This section should be completed by the proposed Coordinator who will oversee the implementation of the grant program. The statement of interest should detail their interest in the role and any relevant experience or qualifications. The proposed Coordinator should also state their interest in participating in more statewide conversations and training. Please attach the Coordinator's resume or brief bio with the statement of interest.

Section V - Letters of Support

Each proposal must include a letter of support from the following:

- a) If applying from a Circuit Court:
 1. The Circuit's Chief Judge and the local Presiding Judge (if applicable);
 2. The Circuit Clerk (unless the applicant is the Clerk); and
 3. Any other relevant partners listed in the program narrative such as other offices in the courthouse like the Sheriff, Illinois JusticeCorps, public libraries, or legal aid agencies.

- b) If applying from a Court of Review:
 1. The Presiding Justice;
 2. The Appellate Clerk (unless the applicant is the Clerk); and
 3. Any other relevant partners listed in the program narrative such as other offices in the courthouse like the Sheriff, Illinois JusticeCorps, public libraries, or legal aid agencies.