

# TENNESSEE ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION STRATEGIC PLAN 2022-2024



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tennessee Supreme Court established the Access to Justice Commission under Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 50. The Rule requires the Commission to develop and update a strategic plan every two years. The strategic plan must educate the public about the legal needs crisis, identify priorities for improving access to justice, and recommend projects and programs to enhance access to justice.

Rule 50 includes an extensive list of responsibilities for the Commission and grants it great latitude in its work. The Commission summarized these responsibilities in its first strategic plan released in 2010. The overarching goals listed below continue to be a foundational pillar of the Commission's work:

- 1.** Involve more lawyers and law students in meeting legal needs so that the public is better served,
- 2.** Provide greater educational opportunities and resources for policymakers, self-represented litigants, the community, lawyers, court personnel, and others,
- 3.** Make the justice system more user-friendly, and
- 4.** Remove barriers to access to justice including, but not limited to, disability, language, literacy, and geography.

# ACCOMPLISHMENTS, LEARNINGS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Commission surveyed a wide variety of stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the equal justice community's perception and understanding of the Commission. The Commission analyzed the survey responses to recognize its accomplishments, comprehend lessons learned, and recognize possible opportunities. A sampling of the survey responses is provided below.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Eviction prevention and response
- Resiliency in response to pandemic challenges
- Expungement continuation during remote work
- Leadership and staff
- Energy and proactivity
- Open and frank conversations about race
- Increased professional-to-professional accessibility
- Created more forms to automate processes
- Better access to resources for rural communities through online services (also still a challenge)
- Expanded collaboration with other groups

## LEARNINGS

- In-person interaction matters
- Still basic issues/problems
- Need is too great for one solution - need multiple responses
- Access to justice gap has widened - in-person working class has suffered
- Value of non-legal contribution/perspective
- Trust remains a major barrier in rural communities
- Solutions to long-standing issues have been limited due to responding to more short-term critical issues
- Solid faith network
- Measuring effectiveness is difficult
- Expansion of pro-bono promotions in law firms and educational institutions

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Justice Bus possibilities
- Educate judges about ATJ
- Increase engagement with local libraries and social services
- Identify and increase hubs in rural communities (e.g., Dollar General) to expand access to online resources
- Local champions network
- Communication channels (more)
- Increase use of non-lawyers & plain language navigators
- Funding for civil legal services
- Re-engage personally
- Housing - consistency and tools/access

# DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The Commission absorbed the information gained in the surveys and carried it forward to its next discussion about emerging, established, and dying trends. The Commission identified trends in the legal community, technology, and in the state of Tennessee and labeled which category best describes each trend. This discussion helped inform the next steps in the planning process and allow for the Commission to have an open dialogue about its needed impact in the next four years.

## THE COMMISSION'S VISION FOR THE NEXT FOUR YEARS

- Develop Program Training Resources for Providers
- Increase and Diversify Funding
- Improve Clarity and Accessibility of Resources
- Provide Targeted Services for Equitable Outcomes
- Increase Brand Awareness and Leverage Reputation
- Identify, Develop and Equip Local Champions and Navigators
- Effectively Collect, Analyze and Utilize Data
- Strengthen Partnerships for Community Engagement

## THE FIVE STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The Commission arrived at five strategic directions for the next four years at the culmination of the planning meeting:

- 1 Master Our Data**
- 2 Cultivate Partnerships**
- 3 Project a Clear Message & Brand**
- 4 Develop & Refine Training Tools**
- 5 Create a Diverse Funding Ecosystem**

The Commission will assess its existing Advisory Committee Structure to prioritize these five directions and will recruit legal and topical experts to guide the Commission.

# 1. MASTER OUR DATA

The Commission is creating a new Data Leadership and Steering Committee. The overarching focus will be to effectively collect, analyze and utilize data. The Committee will seek to gain an understanding of the publicly-available data that already exists and to identify data that needs to be collected and compiled.

Projected impacts the Commission seeks to achieve through the work of this Committee are to:

- Have a method in place to communicate benchmarks,
- Make data easily accessible and understandable, and
- Empower the Commission and stakeholder to make data-informed decisions on legal service delivery.

# 2. CULTIVATING PARTNERSHIPS

The Commission is combining its existing Faith-Based Initiatives Committee and Pro Bono Committee into one “super” Committee, the Pro Bono and Community Engagement Committee. This work of this group will focus on identifying, developing, and equipping local champions and navigators to improve the clarity and accessibility of resources. The Committee will also work to strengthen existing partnerships and create new partnerships through expanding expungement and re-entry projects and targeted outreach to rural communities.

Projected impacts the Commission seeks to achieve through the work of this Committee are:

- Increase participation and membership in the TN Faith & Justice Alliance,
- Establish new networks and new community hubs for ATJ work, and
- Train and prepare legal navigators and local ATJ ambassadors.

## 3. PROJECT CLEAR MESSAGE & BRAND

The Commission is reconstituting its public awareness committee into the Public Awareness and Partnership Outreach Committee. The work of this Committee will focus on increasing the Commission’s brand awareness and leveraging the Commission’s national reputation to increase participation in the Commission’s programs and activities. Publicity and marketing the launch of the Tennessee Justice Bus and the updated ATJ website will be steered by this Committee.

Projected impacts the Commission seeks to achieve through the work of this Committee are:

- The Commission viewed as a pillar of the legal community,
- An established marketing and visual branding campaign, and
- Increase participation in pro bono recognition program and a developed network of current and former recognition recipients to become ambassadors for access to justice.

## 4. DEVELOP AND REFINE TOOLS

The Commission is creating a new Training and Tools Committee with a focus on developing program training resources for the Commission and its partners, creating and promoting user-friendly and easily-accessible resources for all justice system users, and growing access to justice leaders through education to judges, lawyers, law students, and all stakeholders. An initial project will be to identify existing training and educational resources and create needed resources to build an online A2J University.

Projected Impacts the Commission seeks to achieve through the work of this Committee are:

- A robust online A2J curriculum consisting of well-produced and easily-accessible training videos and resources,
- Expanded self-help forms including automated forms, chat bots, and live online answers, and
- A network of informed partners and end-users.

## 5. FUNDING

The Commission will set up a Task Force to focus on increasing and diversifying funding for the Commission and its programs. The Task Force may consult with subject matter experts to explore possible methods to create sustainable funding streams. The Task Force will study court-created access to justice commissions in other states, grant opportunities, private foundations, national and state funding opportunities, and additional funding opportunities it deems appropriate.

The Task Force will operate for the duration of this strategic planning cycle and will present the Commission with its recommendations in a funding action plan prior to the next planning cycle.

## FOCUS ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAIRNESS AND EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

The prior strategic plan released in 2020 includes the Commission's commitment to continuously address issues of racism and disparate impact on racial and ethnic minorities in the Tennessee judicial system. It incorporates the Tennessee Supreme Court's direction for the Commission to lead the search for and advise the Court about how to accomplish change in areas of education and training, our judicial environment, and court policies and procedures that in any way lead to racial bias.

The 2022 strategic plan will move this work away from standalone objectives and goals in this area. All advisory committees and groups organized under the Commission must incorporate racial and ethnic fairness into all of their focuses, projects, and programs. Committees will utilize and update project dashboards to indicate how each project furthers the Commission's racial and ethnic fairness work. These dashboards will be incorporated into the Commission's regular meetings to ensure that racial and ethnic fairness remain at the center of the Commission's work.

# CONCLUSION

The Commission is centered on developing and promoting targeted services that arrive at equitable outcomes. This is the heart of the Commission's planned activities for the next four years. All of the projects and programs the Commission has prioritized will involve planning and evaluation on how they move the needle forward to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion and ensure fair justice regardless of race or status. The Commission commits to developing, enhancing, and maintaining resources that remove barriers to justice and reach Tennesseans with unmet civil legal needs.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# LEARN MORE

To learn more about the Access to Justice Commission and its initiatives, please visit our website or follow us on social media.

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