

Louisiana State Bar Association
Justice for All Project
Progress Report

February 10, 2022



Background

In 2019, the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission was awarded the Justice for All Grant – a project housed at the National Center for State Courts designed to make Louisiana’s justice system more responsive to people’s everyday civil legal needs through innovation, collaboration and support of statewide efforts. After completing a strategic plan and comprehensive assessment of access to legal resources, the Commission was awarded a second grant in May 2021 to address the gaps in available resources in places identified as “civil legal resources deserts” where Louisiana residents must travel more than 45 minutes to reach a civil legal aid office, self-help center, or law library. The ATJ Commission is now working to address barriers to accessing legal help along the Mississippi Delta in Northeast Louisiana - namely Concordia, Tensas, Madison, and East Carroll Parishes. Below is a report on the progress made since receiving the Implementation Grant.

Community Leaders Roundtable Events

In June 2021, members of the JFA team met with community leaders in Lake Providence and Ferriday, Louisiana to discuss the GIS findings, common civil legal issues in the area, and where people go for legal help.



Concordia Parish Community Leaders Roundtable

The most common legal problems raised were custody, heirship property, criminal record sealing, and domestic violence. Leaders explained that local agencies—such as the local libraries and Community Action Agencies—serve as touchpoints for community members when trying to identify services. However, these agencies often rely on the handful or less of attorneys in the area who may or may not be able to assist the client.

From these meetings, a diverse Steering Committee for the project was formed with leadership from the court, local community organizations, libraries, and local government. The JFA Steering Committee serves as a voice for the community for whom the project is intended to reach and a guiding force to facilitate the development and future use of these access points. The Steering Committee convened in July 2021 to discuss the

project and its ultimate goal of creating a civil legal resource access point in East Carroll and Concordia Parishes.



East Carroll Parish Community Leaders Roundtable

The next step was to facilitate community listening sessions to hear from residents and obtain insight from their experiences addressing legal problems and accessing legal services. Four sessions were

planned to occur over two days in August and September in both East Carroll and Concordia Parishes. Surges in COVID cases and devastation caused by Hurricane Ida, however, caused all events to be rescheduled while communities recovered.

Community Listening Sessions

Challenges required the plans to be paused, but thanks to the assistance and perseverance of two local library directors, the Community Listening Sessions were rescheduled and held on January 26th and 27th, 2022. They took place at the main public libraries in Lake Providence and Ferriday, Louisiana. During the listening sessions, community members from East Carroll, Madison, Tensas, and Concordia Parishes discussed their experiences with non-criminal legal issues, how and if they found help, their knowledge of available services, and their levels of comfort with different types of technology.



East Carroll Parish Community Listening Sessions

From these listening sessions, and consistent with the roundtable discussions, the JFA team learned that community members face a variety of legal issues—including divorce, custody, heir property, access to public benefits, and more. Many overwhelmingly indicated that they often do not know where to go for help with their legal issues. And despite the common belief that they could not afford legal services anyway, all responded that they would prefer assistance from an attorney—yet there are a mere 31 attorneys eligible to practice in Concordia and 2 in East Carroll.



Also during the trip to Northeast Louisiana, the JFA team, joined by Greg Landry and Margaret Derise from Acadiana Legal Service Corporation, continued building relationships with local leaders. Members of the JFA team were able to meet with and discuss community needs and resources with Judges Laurie R. Brister and Angela Claxton of the 6th Judicial District Court, librarians and library staff, representatives from Community Action Agencies and faith-based organizations, and members of the Parish School District.



Concordia Parish Community Listening Sessions

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Next Steps

Train the Trainers. As identified by the Community Listening session surveys, many of those in need of legal help in civil legal resource deserts do not know of the existing resources that may address their civil legal needs. To help remedy this, the JFA team plans to develop a “train-the-trainers” series of events for the local public and service community organizations in the region to increase awareness of existing resources. These events are meant to establish connections with local, trusted public interest organizations while teaching the staff of these agencies about existing civil legal resources like the Civil Legal Aid Navigator, LSBA’s find Legal Help Page, and LA.FreeLegalAnswers.org.

Access Point Design. While conducting the train the trainer events, the JFA team also plans to simultaneously develop civil legal aid access points for East Carroll and Concordia parishes. The design and implementation of these access points will be guided by the JFA Steering Committee and the results from the Community Listening Session survey results.

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