



Michigan Justice for All Task Force

Issue 2, June 2020

“The people of Michigan deserve our best effort to provide access to civil justice to all those in need.”

-Justice Brian K. Zahra



Justice Zahra speaking during the first JFA town hall in Grand Rapids about the importance of fairness in civil court proceedings. With Chief Justice McCormack and moderator Angela Tripp listening.



Rebecca, a local resident, sharing her court experience following a traffic accident.

Task Force Begins Addressing Civil Justice Gaps in West Michigan

On a sunny-but-cold Valentine’s Day in Grand Rapids, the Justice for All Task Force held its first town hall meeting to get to the heart of the civil justice gap in west Michigan. As the kickoff for a series of planned public town hall meetings around Michigan, the event included about 60 attendees and testimony from residents, advocates, and attorneys. Speakers discussed topics such as attorney representation, debt collection, traffic issues, personal injury, indigent clients, eviction, and more.

With the right to an attorney applying only in criminal cases, and 7 out of 10 low-income households having at least one civil legal problem in the last year, leaders from the Michigan Supreme Court, Michigan State Bar Foundation, and Michigan Legal Help came together in 2019 to form the Justice for All Task Force to close this gap.

Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Bridget M. McCormack and Justice Brian K. Zahra, a former trial court judge himself, listened to remarks about issues ranging from eviction to personal protection orders, while Michigan Legal Help Executive Director Angela Tripp moderated.

Chief Justice McCormack opened the meeting, “I started my career as a legal aid lawyer. I actually became a lawyer because I wanted to make sure that the justice system was open to everybody, so I am very excited about the Justice for All Task Force, which has a goal of achieving 100 percent access to Michigan’s civil justice system.”

Representing the Supreme Court on the Task Force is Justice Zahra, whose previous experience as a trial court judge at Wayne County Circuit Court inspired him to help lead this effort. “The people of Michigan deserve our best effort to provide access to civil justice to all those in need.”

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JFA Task Force members attending inaugural town hall: Judge Voet and Judge Mayfield.



Christine Gilman, executive director of the Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan, sharing information with town hall attendees.

JFA in the News

- [Justice Zahra interview, Q&A on Detroit Today - WDET \(Feb. 24, 2020\)](#)
- [Need a lawyer but can't afford one? Michigan task force wants to hear from you - Detroit Free Press \(Feb. 21, 2020\)](#)
- [Supreme Court Justices set to hold meeting on civil legal needs in Detroit - Detroit News \(Feb. 21, 2020\)](#)
- [At justice for all forum Grand Rapids residents reiterate lack of access to affordable legal service - WGVU Public Media \(Feb. 17, 2020\)](#)

Gabriel Sanchez, a Grand Rapids attorney who defends debtors, commented on the issue of debt collection, “Nationwide, about 75 percent of debt collections go unanswered so they result in default judgments. And about 90 percent of debtors aren’t represented—that’s both here in Michigan and nationwide. I think there are some very simple steps that can be taken at the practical level to alleviate some of these problems.”

Watch a video of the full town hall meeting [here](#).

The Justice for All Task Force thanks the following judges and local leaders for attending the inaugural town hall:

- Judge T.J. Ackert, Kent County Circuit Court
- Judge Nick Ayoub, 61st District Court (Grand Rapids)
- Chief Judge Mabel Mayfield, Berrien County Trial Court, St. Joseph; Justice for All Task Force
- Judge Joe Rossi, Kent County Circuit Court
- Chief Judge Jon Van Allsburg, Ottawa Co. Circuit Court
- Judge Raymond Voet, 64th District Court, (Ionia); Justice for All Task Force
- Judge Vincent Westra, 8th District Court (Kalamazoo)
- State Rep. Tommy Brann, 77th House District (Wyoming and Byron Twp.)

Resources to Keep the Doors of Justice Open During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- [Michigan Legal Help’s COVID-19 FAQ’s](#)
- [Michigan Supreme Court’s Webpage for Self-Represented Litigants](#)
- [Guidance for Conducting Remote Hearings with Self-Represented Litigants](#)
- [MI-Resolve Online Dispute Resolution](#)
- [Virtual Courtroom Directory](#)

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Michael, local advocate, at the Detroit town hall.



(l to r) Jennifer Bentley, Chief Justice McCormack, and Justice Zahra at the Detroit Town Hall.



3rd Circuit Court Executive Court Administrator Zenell Brown and Chief Judge Kenny attending the Detroit Town Hall.

Residents, Advocates Share Civil Justice Challenges with Task Force at Detroit Town Hall

On a rainy Monday night in February, more than 150 people gathered inside the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union Hall in Detroit to learn, listen, and testify about the civil justice gap in the state. Speakers discussed topics such as attorney representation, domestic violence, sexual assault, appraisals, court license abuse, indigent clients, and eviction.

To complete research on the legal and judicial issues in the state, the Task Force held its second town hall meeting in Detroit to hear from those who have been personally affected by this gap.

“Hearing personal experiences from our communities allows for the research that we’re doing to really come to life,” said Michigan Supreme Court Justice Brian K. Zahra, who represents the Court on the Task Force. “These town halls allow us to put the statistics into perspective.”

Attorney Vanessa Fluker, a Detroit-area solo practitioner who represents many indigent clients, said, “If you have no attorney, your voice isn’t heard at all. People are told to get an attorney or go to legal aid, which is fine except they’re overwhelmed, and then they only cover certain areas; they don’t cover everything. So you have this vast gap of individuals who truly don’t have access to justice.”

Attorney Charlene Snow, of the United Community Housing Coalition, spoke about the importance of the right to counsel in landlord-tenant cases. “In 2017, 30,000 cases were filed in 36th District Court Landlord-Tenant Division. Eighty-three percent of landlords were represented, and four percent of the tenants were represented.”

Watch a video of the full town hall meeting [here](#).

The Justice for All Task Force thanks the following local judges and local officials who took time to attend the event:

- Judge Cynthia Arvant,
46th District Court (Southfield)

Michigan Justice for All Task Force



Detroit state Rep. Tyrone Carter listening to testimony at the Detroit Town Hall

JFA Task Force Planning Team Members

- Justice Brian Zahra, MI Supreme Court
- Jennifer Bentley, MI State Bar Foundation
- Kevin Bowling, Ottawa Co. Circuit Court
- Lee Ann Gaspar, SCAO
- Katie Hennessey, State Bar of Michigan
- Thomas Myers, SCAO
- Angela Tripp, Michigan Legal Help
- Jennifer Warner, SCAO
- Janet Welch, State Bar of Michigan

Additional Task Force Team Members:

- Hon. Mabel Mayfield, Berrien County Trial Court
- Hon. Matthew Stewart, Shiawassee County Circuit Court
- Hon. Raymond Voet, Ionia County District Court
- Nicole Huddleston, Detroit Justice Center
- Martha Gonzalez-Cortez, Kalamazoo Community Foundation
- Elly Jordan, MI Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
- Kim Koscielniak, Library of Michigan
- Ashley Lowe, Lakeshore Legal Aid
- Jill Nylander, Legal Services of Eastern Michigan

- Judge Kameshia Gant, Oakland County Circuit Court
- Judge Adrienne Hinnant-Johnson, 36th District Court (Detroit)
- Judge Denise Page Hood, U.S. District Court Eastern Division
- Judge Noah Hood, Wayne County Circuit Court
- Chief Judge Timothy Kenny, Wayne County Circuit Court
- Judge Kathleen McCarthy, Wayne County Circuit Court
- Chief Judge William McConico, 36th District Court (Detroit)
- Judge Mark McConnell, 18th District Court (Westland)
- Judge David Perkins, Wayne County Probate Court
- Chief Judge Geno Salomone, 23rd District Court (Taylor)
- State Rep. Tyrone Carter, 6th District (Detroit)

What's next for JFA?

The JFA Task Force has continued to collect data through public surveys and virtual focus groups with a broad range of stakeholders, including court administrators, judges, legal aid organizations, community organizations, and domestic violence shelter advocates. The Task Force will be releasing a survey to these stakeholders to collect more detailed input.

The Task Force has several workgroups that will compile the data collected and create the inventory report that will be used to develop the Strategic Plan.