

Research Brief: Analysis of the Social and Economic Impact of the Alaska Community Justice Worker Program (2021-2025)

American Bar Foundation
Access to Justice Research Initiative¹

Who are community justice workers?

Community justice workers (CJWs) are people without law licenses who are trained and authorized to provide limited legal services, including legal advice and representation, to people facing a variety of civil justice problems. Some are frontline workers like staff at shelters and food banks, faith leaders, community health workers or promotoras, or tribal and government employees; some are staff of legal services organizations; still others are students, retirees, or other community volunteers.

Why are community justice workers needed?

The United States faces an access to justice crisis of extraordinary scale, affecting people's ability to make a living, find stable housing, be healthy, and care for those who depend on them. Americans experience between 150 million and 250 million new civil justice problems every year, involving issues like food security, personal safety, access to health care, income and debt, and access to shelter.² Currently, less than 10% of the civil justice problems of low-income people receive any or enough legal help.³

Responding to this crisis requires solutions that are *effective* in connecting people to the legal help they need when they need it, *sustainable* for communities served, justice worker programs, and justice workers themselves, and *scalable* to meet America's vast crisis of unmet legal need.

- ¹ This Brief shares findings from independent research funded by Alaska Legal Service Corporation to understand the work and impact of a five-state expansion of disaster legal assistance in Indian Country provided by community justice workers. The report and the Brief are authored by Matthew Burnett, JD, Rebecca L. Sandefur, PhD, and James Teufel, PhD. Dr. Teufel conducted the original quantitative analyses reported here.
- ² See Rebecca L. Sandefur & James Teufel, *Assessing America's Access to Civil Justice Crisis*, 11 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 753, 765 (2021). At least 120 million of those go unresolved. See THE HAGUE INST. FOR INNOVATION OF LAW & THE INST. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE AM. LEGAL SYS., JUSTICE NEEDS AND SATISFACTION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 235 (2021), <https://iaals.du.edu/sites/default/files/documents/publications/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-us.pdf>.
- ³ The Legal Services Corporation's 2022 study of the legal needs of the low-income population finds an increase in the proportion of the civil justice issues of the poor that receive no or inadequate service, from 86% in 2017 to 92% in 2022. *Justice Gap Research*, LEGAL SERVS. CORP., <https://www.lsc.gov/initiatives/justice-gap-research>. There are no indications that this situation has improved since the study.

What is the Alaska Community Justice Worker Program?

Hosted by Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ALSC) and authorized by the Alaska Supreme Court in 2022, the Alaska Community Justice Worker Program offers Alaskans help in five legal areas: Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), wills, Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) cases, intimate partner violence, and consumer debt. Currently over 200 community justice workers have completed at least one of the free, self-paced, asynchronous online training courses for these five areas and passed knowledge checks to verify mastery. Support for authorized justice workers is provided through the Community Justice Worker Resource Center, including continuing engagement with ALSC attorneys and staff, an online platform with trainings, templates, forms, and guides, and peer-to-peer support.

What have we learned about the effectiveness of Alaska CJWs in connecting people to the help they need?

Community justice workers provide effective services. The largest number of cases handled by Alaska CJWs involved assistance with accessing SNAP benefits. Across over 1,400 cases, CJWs assisted in the recovery of \$23.6 million dollars in supplementary food assistance to Alaskan families, children, and older adults, with direct benefits flowing to roughly 850 households and 2,800 people. During the study period, CJWs were successful in 100% of assessments of SNAP eligibility.⁴ Seventy-three percent (73%) of the cases they worked on resulted in documented receipt of SNAP benefits by clients.

Community justice workers provide impactful services. CJWs' work on SNAP cases not only helped individuals and families to address food insecurity, but also had broader community impacts. Among these were additional economic benefits to communities that SNAP generates. Standard techniques for estimating these impacts suggest that these monies resulted in an additional \$14.5 million dollars in benefit to the communities where people received them.⁵

Alaska CJWs also assisted in the completion of 180 wills. In Indian Country as elsewhere, wills are an important legal tool allowing people to voice their wishes, organize their affairs, reduce burdens on descendants, and protect generational wealth. In American indigenous communities, wills can also be a valuable tool in preventing the fractionalization of Native lands and supporting cultural and community preservation.

What have we learned about how community justice workers can scale up to meet communities' needs?

A community justice workforce can grow quickly. The reach of legal assistance can be greatly extended by incorporating different kinds of justice workers. In 2022, the CJW workforce on the ground in Alaska served about 1 case for every five cases served by volunteer (pro bono) attorneys working with ALSC. By the end of 2024, CJWs were serving nearly 4 cases for every one case served as volunteer attorneys. Between 2022 and 2024, the number of cases served by CJWs increased by 1,575%. This suggests that CJWs can scale up relatively quickly when compared with traditional models, enabling rapid deployment of help to more people.

⁴ Joy Anderson & Sarah Carver, *Community Justice Workers: Alaska's Response to the Access to Justice Crisis*, 38 MIE (2024).

⁵ Mark Zandi & Bernard Yaros, *Macroeconomic Impact of Home and Community-Based Services Expansion*, Moody's Analytics (2021).

Community justice workers can reach underserved areas and groups. Alaska community justice workers served a diverse population: over one quarter (26.5%) of their clients had a disability, 7% were veterans, and over one in ten (11.9%) had experienced intimate partner violence. Three fifths (60%) of clients were Alaska Native or American Indian. The program also allowed ALSC to extend its reach into more communities in a vast and rural state. Community justice work touched over half of the state's zip codes, including towns and villages with no attorneys and those off the road system.⁶ Community justice workers served more people outside the state's three largest metro areas than in them.

What do we know about the sustainability of community justice work in Alaska?

A community justice worker program can drive new funding opportunities. Alaska's community justice worker program has allowed ALSC to increase funding from diverse sources. Between 2022 and 2025, ALSC spent or secured approximately \$3 million in new funding for justice workers.

Community justice workers deliver a strong return on investment. A basic element of sustainability is return on investment: given the resources necessary to produce something, what value is created as a result of that investment. Initial findings from the study of Alaska's justice worker program are promising. The estimated financial return on investment from public benefit value for people and their communities under a federal grant focused on disaster legal assistance was approximately \$25 of benefit for every \$1 invested.

What do we still need to learn?

Justice workers are a relatively new source of legal help. How can people find out about them and understand what they do? Even the best service cannot be impactful if it is not used. In Alaska, our research suggests that prior experience with ALSC, advice from family and friends about where to go for help, and referrals from community organizations were the most common ways in which people connect with CJWs. What are other opportunities for effective outreach that can help people learn about justice workers and how they help?

What factors support justice workers in continuing in their roles? In these relatively new programs, we don't yet know what best helps justice workers feel supported, effective, and rewarded. In 2023, ALSC created a Justice Worker Resource Center "focused on developing tools and practices for training, workforce development, support, and sustainability..."⁷ What are opportunities for these and other efforts to sustain justice work?

As the tasks necessary to do justice work evolve, how do justice workers and programs respond? Changing eligibility standards for public benefits like SNAP and Medicaid will mean that justice workers need to participate in cases in new ways in order to be effective. How can this growth be well supported? What role can emerging technologies, such as Generative AI, play? What new training or additional authorizations may be needed for justice workers to continue as an effective frontline workforce?

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Anderson & Carver, *supra* n. 4, p. 35.

Data and analysis.

ALSC and the American Bar Foundation research team partnered for the project. Data analyzed included case services records from December 2021 through mid-March 2025.

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