

Research Brief: Analysis of the Social and Economic Impact of the Montana Community Justice Worker Pilot Program (2025-2026)

American Bar Foundation
Access to Justice Research Initiative¹

Executive Summary

Montana's Community Justice Worker Pilot Program offers strong evidence that trained, authorized legal workers without law licenses can help close the civil justice gap in practical, cost-effective ways. From January 2025 through June 2026, community justice workers handled 161 cases, largely involving public benefits (including health insurance) and income support, and produced documented positive outcomes in more than half of them. Brief services were especially effective, with a 92.9% success rate, suggesting that assistance beyond advice alone can be critical both to resolving common legal problems and to measuring the outcomes of legal services. The pilot generated an estimated \$3.8 million in direct financial benefits for clients and their households, nearly \$960,000 in additional local GDP, and \$20.57 in net benefits for every dollar invested. These preliminary findings support continued expansion of community justice worker programs while pointing to the need for further research on sustainability, expanded practice areas, and better ways to measure non-financial benefits such as improved health, food security, and housing stability.

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.

¹ This Brief shares findings from independent research supported by the Alaska Legal Service Corporation (ALSC) to understand the work and impact of a five-state expansion of disaster legal assistance in Indian Country provided by community justice workers, which was funded by the Legal Services Corporation (LSC). It is authored by Matthew Burnett, JD, James Teufel, PhD, and Rebecca L. Sandefur, PhD. Dr. Teufel conducted the quantitative analyses reported here.

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.

What is the Montana Community Justice Worker Program?

From January 2025 through June 2026 (18 months), Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA) launched a Community Justice Worker Pilot Program.⁴ This program continues beyond this study period and, based on its success, is expected to grow under a new proposed rule that significantly expands Community Justice Worker authorization to include legal advice and in-court representation.⁵ During the 18-month period we analyzed, CJWs engaged in 161 legal cases.⁶ Of the 161 cases, services for 135 were supported by Legal Services Corporation (LSC) Disaster Grant funding⁷ and services for 26 were supported by other funding sources.

The CJWs primarily provided two types of assistance: counsel and advice (explaining the law and suggesting potential actions) and brief services (discrete, time-limited legal assistance that goes beyond basic advice and consultation).⁸ Most cases involved public benefits and income-support, including Medicaid and Medicare, SNAP, Social Security, TANF, unemployment compensation, and energy assistance. Montana CJWs also completed their own client intakes, which typically ranged from 20-60 minutes per intake.

2 See Sandefur, R. L., & Teufel, J. (2021). *Assessing America's Access to Civil Justice Crisis*. UC Irvine Law Review, 11(3), 753-780. See also Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System, & Hiil. (2021). *Justice needs and satisfaction in the United States of America: Legal problems in daily life*. University of Denver. <https://iaals.du.edu/publications/justice-needs-and-satisfaction-united-states-america>

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. <https://www.lsc.gov/initiatives/justice-gap-research>. There are no indications that this situation has improved since the study.

4 The majority of cases were handled by a single community justice worker. Starting in early 2026 this person transitioned to a role responsible for expanding the program and a second community justice worker was hired.

5 See Supreme Court of the State of Montana's Order Re: Proposed Community Justice Worker Program and Associated Amendments to the Rules for Admission to the Bar of Montana, available at <https://juddocumentservice.mt.gov/getDocByCTrackId?DocId=571427>

6 From January 2025 through June 2026, Montana Legal Services Association's two community justice workers (CJWs) engaged in 161 legal cases (legal needs taken on by the CJW and client) and 10 legal matters (legal needs not taken on as a case by the CJW).

7 See Legal Services Corporation, 2023 Disaster Relief Grants Awarded to Legal Aid Organizations, available at <https://www.lsc.gov/press-release/2023-disaster-relief-grants-awarded-legal-aid-organizations>

8 Brief services are synonymous with limited action services. Based on LSC's 2017 CSR Handbook, examples of brief services include communications with third or opposing parties, completion of forms and simple documents, preparation court or administrative forms or documents used by a client. Note that during the pilot period, five administrative hearings held by the DPHHS Office of Administrative Hearings and one Social Security Administration (SSA) Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) hearing included full CJW representation but were coded as "brief services" in the case management system. Counsel and advice cases focus on advising clients relevant facts, applying relevant law to those facts, and/or counseling client on aspects of the legal issue.

What have we learned about the effectiveness of Montana CJWs in helping people resolve legal problems?

Community justice workers produced positive outcomes in more than half of their cases. Of the 161 cases handled by Montana CJWs, 52.5% resulted in at least one documented positive material outcome for a client, such as receipt or maintenance of Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. In total, 85 cases were successful in that the client received at least one positive material outcome (116 total positive material benefits such as income, food, utility, and healthcare payer sources), while 76 or were unsuccessful, unaddressed, or unknown.

Brief services were highly effective in producing positive material outcomes. Among the 85 cases receiving brief services, 79 were successful, representing a 92.9% success rate. By comparison, only five of the 75 counsel and advice cases achieved success by this measure. While part of this difference may reflect the fact that outcomes are easier to identify and document for brief-service cases than for counsel and advice cases, our analysis found a statistically significant difference between the two levels of service and suggests the need for further research.

What kinds of legal problems did Montana CJWs help people resolve?

Public benefits cases accounted for most successful outcomes. Medicaid or Medicare cases, where a person sought Medicaid (typically an appeal or settlement at an administrative review before an appeal) or Medicare insurance, Medicare Savings Program, or Medicaid Home and Community Based Services benefits (primarily associated with Medicaid issues or application for Medicare due to co-eligibility with SSDI) produced 41 successful cases out of 65 total, a 63% success rate in which people received at least one Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services benefit. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cases, which almost always included appeals and pre-appeal remedies settled during administrative review as well as less frequent initial applications or recertifications due to co-eligibility when addressing a Medicaid or Social Security issue, produced 29 successful cases out of 44, or 66%. Social Security cases, primarily responding to termination of benefits related to continuing disability review, produced eight successful cases out of 37. The four cases involving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) produced three successful outcomes. Other income-maintenance cases had four successful outcomes out of five cases.

Successful cases produced multiple material benefits for clients. The 85 successful cases generated 116 documented successful material outcomes. The most common successful outcomes involved obtaining, maintaining, or regaining Medicaid insurance benefits (52), SNAP (29), Medicare Savings Program benefits (11), and reductions or waivers of overpayments or debt (8). Other outcomes (17) included obtaining or maintaining Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), TANF benefits, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security retirement, Medicare insurance, or Medicaid home- and community-based service benefits.

What is the time investment in a case?

Montana CJWs generally resolved cases with relatively limited amounts of staff time. Cases involving counsel and advice required an average of 3 hours and 42 minutes, while brief services cases required an average of 6 hours and 50 minutes. Across the 160 cases included in the service-level analysis, successful cases averaged 6 hours and 36 minutes and unsuccessful cases averaged 3 hours and 59 minutes.

Whom did Montana community justice workers help?

Montana CJWs served people across a range of ages and backgrounds. The program's clients included 110 women, 50 men, and one person who did not share their gender identity. Among 161 primary clients, 132 identified as White (82%), 20 as Native American (12%), and five as Hispanic (3%); four clients did not identify their race or ethnicity. The average client age was 47 years old.

Successful cases reached people beyond the individual named as the primary client. The 85 successful cases impacted households as well as the primary client. An estimated 154 people benefited from successful CJW-assisted cases and related gains in household income, greater access to medical care, or improved food or energy security. Of the 154 people in client households that were indirectly or directly impacted by case outcomes, 97 were adults and 57 were children.

How did people connect with Montana community justice workers?

Most clients entered the program through direct contact with the statewide legal aid provider, Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA). About three quarters of the connections (76.5%) came through MLSA's telephone, online, or in-person intake. Telephone intake accounted for 37.3%, online intake for 19.9%, and in-person intake for 19.3% of total connections. Outreach, letters or email, fax, and mailed applications accounted for the remaining intakes. These findings provide an initial picture of how people reach CJWs, but additional research should examine which referral and outreach strategies are most effective in connecting people with assistance before their legal problems become more difficult to resolve.

What have we learned about the economic impact of Montana CJWs?

Community justice workers generated substantial financial benefits for clients. Across all successful outcomes, the estimated financial benefits to clients and their households totaled \$3,817,951 over the course of benefit receipt.

Client benefits generated additional economic activity in Montana communities. Across all funding sources, direct financial benefits received by CJW clients stimulated an estimated additional \$4,295,739 in local

economic output ⁹ and \$959,726 in local GDP. ¹⁰ Economic resources received by clients are spent in local communities, stimulating full-time equivalent jobs in those communities over time, measured in job-years.¹¹ Successful Montana CJW public benefit cases were estimated to support 23 local job-years over time. The largest financial benefit came from Medicaid and Medicare, which accounted for an estimated \$2,351,902 in direct financial benefits to clients and their families and generated an estimated additional \$2,740,219 in local economic output and \$606,126 in local GDP.

What do we know about the social return on investment in community justice work?

The preliminary findings suggest a substantial social return on investment. The estimated operational cost of Montana's Pilot Community Justice Worker Program from January 2025 through June 2026 was \$211,764, or approximately \$1,569 per case. During the same period, these cases (135 cases) generated an estimated \$3,651,456 in direct financial benefits to clients and \$916,818 in additional local GDP.

Every dollar invested generated \$20.57 in net benefits to clients and their communities, a return on investment of over 20:1. Combining direct client financial benefits to clients and additional local GDP produced an estimated total benefit of \$4,568,274. After accounting for the \$211,764 investment, the resulting social return on investment was approximately \$20.57 in net benefits for every dollar invested, or an SROI of 2,057%. Put another way, each dollar invested generated more than \$20 in total benefits to clients and their communities. This represents a nearly three-fold increase over the national average of seven dollars of return for every one dollar invested in civil legal aid cases.¹²

Economic effects extended well beyond the jobs directly supported by the program. The funding for the 18-month pilot program supported approximately 1.5 CJW job-years. Over the same period, the direct financial benefits flowing to clients supported an estimated 20 additional job-years in the broader community. Thus, for every CJW job-year funded, an estimated nearly 14 job-years would be produced in the broader community.

9 Economic output reflects the total activity across the supply chain as businesses and consumers receive and expend money. It includes both intermediate and final sales of goods and services: economic output = final outputs produced and sold + intermediate inputs and outputs produced and sold.

10 Local GDP, or value added, measures the new, non-redundant economic value of final goods and services produced and sold. It is calculated using final output sales only, excluding intermediate sales and expenditures: Local GDP (value added) = gross output - intermediate inputs and outputs or local GDP (value added) = net final output. For this reason, local GDP impacts are equal to or less than total economic output impacts.

11 A job-year is an estimate of inflation-adjusted dollars required to support one job over 12 months. Since benefits are often received for more than one year and by more than one case participant, the adjusted estimated benefit dollars are summed and compared to the expected benefit funding required to generate one full-time equivalent job in the community. For example, if \$100,000 inflation-adjusted dollars support the generation of one full-time job in a community and \$100,000 in adjusted income benefits were estimated to be received over 5 years by 3 successful cases, then 1 job-year would be supported by the successful benefit cases over time.

12 Legal Services Corporation. (2026). The economic case for civil legal aid. <https://www.lsc.gov/our-impact/economic-impact>

What do we still need to learn?

How can community justice workers expand the number and kinds of legal problems they can successfully address? The Montana Pilot Community Justice Worker Program produced its strongest documented outcomes through a service model of brief services (services more extensive than only legal advice and counsel) in public benefit matters. Further research should examine whether similar results can be achieved across other common areas of civil legal need and through further expanded forms of authorized legal representation and assistance.

How should success be measured for services limited to counsel and advice? The preliminary findings show a striking difference between documented success in brief service cases and counsel and advice cases: across the highest level of case service received, approximately 93% of brief services cases resulted in documented successful material outcomes whereas 7% of counsel and advice cases included a documented successful outcome. Outcomes for brief services cases were more likely to be known and recorded than those for counsel and advice cases. For that reason, the degree to which a brief services model may have increased effectiveness over a counsel and advise model is not precisely measurable, but the findings clearly show that successful outcomes were more knowable and documented by CJWs in brief services cases. Better methods for capturing outcomes, regardless of level of service received, would help to refine measurement of the relationship between service level and outcomes.

How can community justice work be sustained and expanded? The Montana analysis provides an initial estimate of program costs and finds substantial economic benefits, but additional research is needed to understand the resources required to build and maintain a justice worker workforce over time, including recruitment, training, supervision, technology, and ongoing support.

How should the social value of community justice work be measured over time? The current analysis estimates direct financial benefits, local economic output, local GDP, and job-years generated through client benefits. Future research should examine additional outcomes that are more difficult to express in monetary terms, such as improved health, food security, housing stability, and people's basic ability to effectively navigate public systems.

Data and analysis

Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA), Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ALSC), and the Access to Justice Research Initiative at the American Bar Foundation (ABF) partnered for this research project. Data analyzed included case services records from January 2025 – June 2026 (18 months).

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