

New law creates Colorado Equal Justice Fund to support legal aid throughout Colorado

Legal aid organizations say fund creates vital resources to help low-income Coloradans facing homelessness, domestic violence, lack of access to healthcare, and much more

June 4, 2024 (DENVER) – Yesterday, Gov. Jared Polis signed into law a bill that creates a new, sustainable fund for legal aid, bringing an estimated \$2 million a year to organizations that offer free civil (non-criminal) legal services to low-income Coloradans. This fund will support civil legal aid organizations representing Coloradans on issues like domestic violence, elder rights, and homelessness. Unlike in criminal cases, low-income Coloradans are not guaranteed an attorney if they cannot afford to hire one, regardless of how dire the case may be. They must rely on nonprofits instead.

[HB 24-1286](#) creates the equal justice fund authority to distribute money from a new fee to support local organizations that provide legal representation and legal advice to low-income Coloradans. The equal justice authority is governed by the equal justice authority board, which is created in the bill.

The bill was sponsored by Rep. Junie Joseph, Rep. Mandy Lindsay, Sen. Dylan Roberts, and Sen. Kevin Priola.

“Equal justice and dignity, regardless of income, is a bedrock principle of our legal system,” said Matthew Baca, executive director of Colorado Legal Services. “We and other legal aid organizations help people in some of life’s toughest moments, from someone who has been struggling to obtain an ID who, once we help them break through the complicated bureaucratic logjam, can find stable housing and

employment, to victims of human trafficking who, once we help them escape their situation, have a chance to thrive in their community. This fund helps ensure we can continue doing this important work throughout Colorado.”

The new equal justice fee is \$10 in county court and \$30 in district court and appeals. People who are below 125% of the federal poverty line are exempt from paying the fee.

“The Equal Justice Authority will provide critical support to Coloradans who are trying to navigate our state’s courts,” said Zach Neumann, co-founder and CEO of the Community Economic Defense Project. “The program ensures that families facing eviction, foreclosure, and debt collection will have access to counsel, and not have to face a court date alone.”

“Limited access to legal representation undermines the ability of people living in poverty to enforce laws meant to protect them,” shared Lydia McCoy, CEO of the Colorado Center on Law and Policy. “This new fund will ensure an increased number of our most vulnerable Coloradans get the support and justice they deserve.”

Before the bill’s passage, Colorado ranked 31st in the country on per capita state legal aid funding. [The Denver Post estimates](#) that 23 Colorado counties are legal deserts, and 261,000 people live in those areas (about half the population of Wyoming, which receives over six times the amount of state funding per capita that Colorado does).

The Colorado Access to Justice Commission released [a report](#) this year showing that Colorado trails far behind its western neighbors in legal aid funding. Wyoming spends about 3.5 times as much per capita as Colorado on legal aid. Nebraska and New Mexico spend almost three times as much per capita as Colorado on legal aid; Nevada spends over six times as much.

“In terms of state funding for legal aid, Colorado has been far outpaced by its neighbors,” said Elisa Overall, executive director of the Colorado Access to Justice Commission. “With the passage of HB24-1286, Colorado is starting to catch up. This

is a proud moment for our state.”

Everyone benefits when more people have legal representation, and a [third-party assessment](#) this year showed that Colorado Legal Services has a social return on investment of 619%, meaning that for every dollar invested in Colorado Legal Services, communities benefit economically by \$6.19. Judges and court staff spend less time working with people who don't know court processes, and people who have to go to court can secure better outcomes. Communities throughout Colorado benefit when we prevent homelessness and prevent the most vulnerable Colorado from slipping through gaps in our safety net.

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