

Vermont Access to Justice Coalition Legislative Request for Funding

The Vermont Access to Justice Coalition asks the Vermont Legislature to fund an annual grant of \$525,000 to the Vermont Bar Foundation for access to justice programs; \$500,000 of this amount will be used for direct grants to qualifying organizations, and \$25,000 will fund VBF administration of its programs.

Background

The Vermont A2J Coalition consists of the Vermont Supreme Court (VSC), Vermont Legal Aid (VLA), Legal Services Vermont (LSV), Vermont Law and Graduate School (VLGS)/South Royalton Legal Clinic (SRLC), the Vermont Bar Association (VBA) and the Vermont Bar Foundation (VBF). The Coalition was created in January of 2004. Its members provide a variety of legal services to low-income Vermonters.

The 6-partner Coalition has long been aware of significant gaps in legal services to Vermonters. Most of these gaps relate to lack of funding. All A2J partners are affected when one partner's coverage is reduced by budget cuts and staffing decreases—it means more work for other A2J organizations and growing gaps in services to clients. This is occurring at the same time demand for legal services has doubled. The Coalition members have resolved to unite for the funding increases necessary to meet this demand and close the service gaps.

This request made by the Coalition is in addition to annual appropriations for Vermont Legal Aid and Legal Services Vermont, and in addition to the annual funding of the Vermont Judiciary.

Funding through the Vermont Bar Foundation, a Coalition Partner

Coalition members have agreed that annual legislative funding of \$525,000 for the Vermont Bar Foundation is necessary to address legal access service gaps in Vermont.

1. The VBF is an experienced and trusted entity well equipped to receive and fairly distribute grant funds. The VBF, a 501c3 organization, has distributed IOLTA funds for 40 years through its competitive and non-competitive grants programs. It has raised and granted more than \$27 million to more than 60 deserving organizations ranging from legal aid providers to law school clinics and domestic violence prevention programs.
2. The VBF has an active and experienced Board of Directors and grant committee. The VBF was tapped by the federal DOJ to receive and distribute BOA settlement funds to assist with foreclosure defense and community redevelopment programs. The VBF engages annually in fundraising for the Poverty Law Fellowship Program, and solicits contributions from lawyers through a link with their on-line licensing program.
3. As a member of the A2J Coalition, the VBF is well informed about legal needs of varying Vermont communities. It can and does respond to changes in those needs. For example, after the July 2023 floods, the VBF quickly funded a project to provide flood victims with advice on legal issues ranging from FEMA and SBA programs to landlord/tenant issues to insurance claims.

4. To distribute \$500,000 of the \$525,000 legislative appropriation, the VBF will invite legal access providers (including but not limited to Coalition members) to submit annual grant applications. Those applying can seek to fund existing programs (e.g., the VBA's adult inv. guardianship low bono program or LSV's family law clinics) or new initiatives (e.g., VLGS' proposed LGBTQ project.)
5. The VBF will prioritize grant-giving based upon current legal needs, legislative mandates, and numbers of Vermonters served, with goals of avoiding duplication and filling gaps in legal services.
6. The VBF will use the remaining \$25,000 of the annual legislative appropriation to fund its own on-going administrative needs. IOLTA monies and funding raising efforts does not provide long-term, reliable support for this critical organization.

For further information contact Bob Paolini, Executive Director, Vermont Bar Association at bpaolini@vtbar.org 802-775-5189.

Vermont Bar Foundation History and Impact

The Vermont Bar Foundation (VBF) is the exclusive foundation dedicated to the legal services community.

Our mission is to enhance justice access for low-income Vermonters, primarily funded by Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA).

IOLTA pools interest from lawyers' trust accounts to provide civil legal aid without taxing the public. It's a vital funding source for organizations like WomenSafe, Association of Africans Living in Vermont, Have Justice Will Travel, Circle, Vermont Legal Aid and others.

Unlike other states, Vermont doesn't have a rule making IOLTA-participating banks pay interest rates on par with non-IOLTA accounts, leading some banks to pay well below the current market rate. This absence of a rule in Vermont makes IOLTA funding less reliable.

In 2023, the Vermont Bar Foundation gave just under \$1 million in grants to 12 organizations. Although this is a significant amount, the VBF's Board of Directors regrets not fully funding all requests, which exceeded \$1.3 million.

Besides awarding grants to deserving nonprofits, the VBF also raises money to support the work of the Poverty Law Fellow.

The Poverty Law Fellowship is a competitive two-year program designed for early-career attorneys dedicated to increasing legal access for low-income individuals in Vermont.

Past Vermont Poverty Law Fellows have worked on a range of issues, including access to justice for low-wage workers and for Vermonters experiencing housing insecurity. Maya Tsukazaki is the 2022-2024 Vermont Poverty Law Fellow, focused on access to justice for Vermont's immigrant communities.

Our impact and that of the Poverty Law Fellows not only helps those in need, but it also helps boost the Vermont economy. There is an \$11 return on investment for every dollar donated to the VBF to fund low-income legal services in Vermont.

Our grants make a significant difference in the lives of low-income Vermonters by assisting them with critical legal issues affecting their families, homes, incomes, jobs, and access to essential services.

The demand for access to justice has grown exponentially over the years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, but we have remained excellent stewards of our resources.

The VBF Board of Directors, committee members, and Executive Director exercise meticulous oversight of the resources entrusted to the VBF. Hundreds of volunteer hours a year are devoted toward raising, accounting for and marshaling these resources in aid of those who need the rights and protections of our laws but cannot afford the legal services by which to make those rights and protections a reality.

The Board and staff take great pride in our past achievements and eagerly anticipate this year's successes and the positive influence we'll exert across Vermont.

Thank you!