

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

TIMOTHY F. MCGOUGHAN

Access to Justice Remains at the Forefront of the NJSBA's Mission



The third tenet of the New Jersey State Bar Association's mission statement pledges this:

"To promote access to the justice system, fairness in its administration, and the independence and integrity of the judicial branch."

In the decades since the NJSBA first adopted this statement, access to justice remains a guiding goal of the Association's service to the greater legal system in New Jersey. No one, least of all attorneys, wants a two-tier justice system, where large swaths of the population are denied quality legal representation. Everyone deserves their day in court, represented by someone who is bound by strict ethical rules.

I am proud to continue the efforts that my predecessors initiated to meet the ongoing need to provide high-quality, affordable legal services to the public, especially for low- and middle-income New Jersey residents who face difficulty retaining counsel for common matters like debt-collection cases, landlord-tenant lawsuits, and mortgage foreclosures. I believe the best and most efficient way to narrow the justice gap for this population is to match them with lawyers willing to work *pro bono* or at a reduced rate.

As we head into the holiday season, when many of us reflect on the year and how we have made contributions to our families and communities, I'm happy to report that the Association continues to expand its access to justice initiatives on multiple fronts.

Legal Edge, the NJSBA's proprietary software that helps match unrepresented clients with attorneys willing to work at a reduced rate, just celebrated its fifth year of operation in the Morris/Sussex County vicinage. Soon after the anniversary, the program passed a key milestone of assisting more than 500 people—who otherwise would have likely represented themselves in court—by matching them with counsel.

The NJSBA developed Legal Edge's online portal with the goal of alleviating the pressure the courts face in handling an unprecedented number of *pro se* litigants who are just above

the threshold to qualify for free legal services. The result has been a boon to all parties in the Morris and Sussex counties justice system, including litigants, attorneys and the courts.

Given the software's success, I'm also excited to announce that larger vicinages like Essex, Bergen and Somerset are on their way to establishing separate reduced-fee platforms after taking cues from the Morris/Sussex model. It's our goal to expand Legal Edge to every county in the state. Doing so would address the access to justice gap, increase attorney case-loads and stave off the encroachment of online legal services in the profession. I urge local bar leaders throughout the state to inquire about Legal Edge to establish a reduced-fee program in their county or even bolster an existing one.

This year, the Association also published the *Access to Justice Guide*, a free online resource for the public who may need help navigating the complex justice system. The guide—soon to be released in Spanish—offers information on how to find and afford an attorney, participate in hearings, contact legal service organizations for help and more.

More than a dozen esteemed attorneys produced the comprehensive guide in partnership with Seton Hall Law School for state residents who are unable to afford counsel or lack knowledge of the law. It provides a list of legal assistance organizations that handle criminal, domestic violence and immigration matters, among other cases.

For people interested in representing themselves in court, the guide includes a section on general guidance for legal-related proceedings and instructions to submit forms for various court filings. I encourage you to view the full guide at njsba.com and circulate it among those who might benefit.

As a former municipal court judge and prosecutor for 23 years, I have personally seen the access to justice gap and the incredibly high threshold to obtain a public defender. The NJSBA, through our Artificial Intelligence Task Force created this year, is also looking at possible areas that AI can help bridge this access to justice gap. If you have any ideas or thoughts on this issue, please feel free to email me at tmcgoughan@mcgoughanlaw.com or give me a call at 732-660-7115. ■