

Access to Justice opening speech June 24, 2016 (Simeon Acoba)

Aloha everyone and welcome to the 8th annual access to justice conference.

We are fortunate to hear today from Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman. We welcome him to our state and to this conference.

The conference is intended to be informative and instructive—as you can see, the program includes subjects as diverse as community involvement in access to justice, Hawaii land law, homelessness, implicit bias and more.

Certain offerings are instructive—training for those wishing to serve in the access to justice rooms and instructions for attorneys interested in the anticipated online information network –the Hawaii Pro Bono Online Project.

We are grateful to have over 250 attendees today, and we thank the commission’s Committee on Education, Communications and Conferencing Planning for organizing the program—especially Dean Avi Soifer, the chair, and Carol Muranaka, the vice chair of the committee.

I want to briefly mention four matters of some significance from the Commission’s perspective – up to this time of the year.

First is the launching of the pro bono appellate program. This was a joint project of the appellate section of the Hawaii State Bar Association especially Rebecca Copeland, and the Access to Justice Commission with the encouragement of the Chief Justice. This program matches lawyers willing to do pro bono appellate representation-- including the possibility of oral argument—of indigent parties in cases presenting substantial legal issues. The first case in this program was recently decided by the Hawaii Supreme Court—Gao v. State-- in which the worker compensation claimant prevailed with the help of his pro bono appellate attorney.

Thank you to the supreme court for mentioning the pro bono program in the opinion.

Second, is the preservation of the indigent legal assistance fund despite proposals to displace it. The ILAF generated about 1.3 million dollars this past year. Those funds are distributed to legal service providers under a statutory formula and are essential to the viability of access to justice programs.

Also in the legislative arena, an appropriation of \$750,000 was made to the judiciary to provide for service contracts for low- and moderate-income persons. We need to acknowledge the work of Representative Karl Rhoads who shepherded the appropriation through the legislature, Chief Justice Recktenwald who supported ILAF and the appropriation even in the midst of having to advocate for his own judiciary budget, and Gary Slovin who oversaw and guided us through the legislative process.

Third, as I mentioned, is the Hawaii pro bono online project that will enable attorneys and participants to overcome barriers of geography and time by allowing them to communicate with each other over the internet. We believe this will greatly increase the number of people served by self-help programs in our state.

Finally, is Hawaii's ranking as the third leading state in the nation in the provision of services for those underserved and underrepresented. This Justice Index ranking is significant. It recognizes the continuing work of the judiciary led by Chief Justice Recktenwald, with the aid of legal service providers, the bar association of Hawaii, the Commission, and supporting agencies—to afford equal access to the legal system.

We are appreciative of the focus the Justice Index has brought to our state's progress. But the index is also a reminder of the need for sustained commitment in the pursuit of justice for everyone.

The purpose of the Commission is to initiate, support, and evaluate efforts to attain equality of access and opportunity. While we often focus on the legal service providers whose primary function is to achieve this end, the commission's reach extends beyond that.

The premise of the Commission as reflected in the composition of its members is that equal access is an objective that can be truly realized only if our state community, including the three branches of government, share in common commitment to achieve it.

As a Commission we must value and we must promote the involvement of the greater community toward this end.

In closing, on behalf of the commissioners, we thank the Hawaii Justice Foundation and its executive director, Bob LeClair, the Cades Foundation and Gunner Schull, the bar and its executive director, Pat Mau Shimizu, and the Richardson School of Law for their support of this conference.

We hope you find the conference enlightening, energizing, and inspiring.
Thank you.