



**HAWAI'I
ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION**

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2025

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I. HAWAII ACCESS TO JUSTICE COMMISSION

This report highlights the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission's ("Commission") activities in 2025.

A. Commissioners

The Commission is comprised of twenty-two Commissioners. The various Commissioners are appointed as designated in Rule 21 of the Rules of the Supreme Court of the State of Hawai'i by separate appointing authorities:

- Chief Justice of the Hawai'i Supreme Court
- Hawai'i State Bar Association ("HSBA")
- Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Service Providers
- Hawaii Justice Foundation ("HJF")
- Williams S. Richardson School of Law
- Hawai'i Paralegal Association
- Governor of the State of Hawai'i
- Attorney General of the State of Hawai'i
- State of Hawai'i Senate President
- State of Hawai'i Speaker of the House

The Commissioners who served in 2025 are listed on the next page.



	Name	Appointed By
1.	Hon. Joseph E. Cardoza (Ret.) (Chair)	Chief Justice
2.	Hon. Vladimir P. Devens	Chief Justice
3.	Hon. Brian A. Costa	Chief Justice
4.	Hon. Joanna E. Sokolow	Chief Justice
5.	Hon. Michael K. Soong	Chief Justice
6.	Derek R. Kobayashi (Vice Chair)	Hawai'i State Bar Association
7.	Christine Daleiden	Hawai'i State Bar Association
8.	Jeremy J. K. Butterfield	Hawai'i State Bar Association
9.	Carol K. Muranaka	Hawai'i State Bar Association
10.	Rachel Figueroa (Volunteer Legal Services of Hawai'i)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers
11.	David Kopper (Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers
12.	Kathryn Mayer (Hawaii Disability Rights Center)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers
13.	Makalika Naholowa'a (Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers
14.	Heather Lusk (Non-attorney public representative)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers in consultation with the Chief Justice
15.	Rona Fukumoto (Non-attorney public representative)	Hawai'i Consortium of Legal Services Providers in consultation with the Chief Justice
16.	Mihoko Ito	Hawaii Justice Foundation
17.	Dean Aviam Soifer (Ret.)	William S. Richardson School of Law
18.	Kalen Sato	Hawai'i Paralegal Association
19.	Trista Nicole Speer	Governor
20.	Matthew Dvonch	Attorney General
21.	Hon. Karl Rhoads	Senate President
22.	Hon. Della Au Belatti	Speaker of the House



B. Committees

Rule 21(f) of the Rules of the Hawai'i Supreme Court provides that the Commission may create such committees as it deems necessary or desirable to facilitate the work of the Commission.

The Commission created committees and various other ad hoc subcommittees and task force groups to carry out and facilitate its mission. Commissioners serve as chairs for the committees. The role of each committee is advisory only, and each committee is intended to make such recommendations to the Commission as the committee determines to be appropriate. The committees, their chairs, their members, and the areas of responsibility assigned to them may be changed at any time by the Commission.

The initial charters for the subject matter committees are drawn largely from two sources—the fourteen purposes of the Commission set forth in Supreme Court Rule 21 and the action steps proposed by the Hawai'i Access to Justice Hui in its “Community Wide Action Plan To Increase Access to Justice in Hawai'i by 2010” (the “Community Wide Action Plan”). The Community Wide Action Plan grew out of “The 2007 Assessment of Civil Legal Needs and Barriers of Low- and Moderate-Income People in Hawai'i,” and both the Assessment and the Action Plan are included in the Report provided to each Commissioner entitled “Achieving Access to Justice for Hawai'i's People” (the “Report”).

The Commission began the process of reviewing its committee structure in October 2022. It was decided that the Administration Committee would review the matter and make recommendations to the Commission. On March 20, 2023, the Commission approved the restructuring of certain committees and task forces of the Commission.

The Administration Committee provides the following functions:

- Assist in providing reports on the status of operations.
- Assist in providing administrative and logistical assistance to the Commission and its committees and task forces.
- Assist in developing policies and initiatives that further the mission of the Commission.
- Coordinate the activities of volunteers in support of the Commission's initiatives.

During 2025, the members of this committee were Judge Joseph E. Cardoza (Ret.)(Chair), Judge Brian Costa, Christine Daleiden, Judge Jill



Hasegawa, Derek Kobayashi, Carol K. Muranaka, Judge Joanna Sokolow, Judge Michael Soong, and Tracey Wiltgen.

In 2025, the Administration Committee worked on the debt collection project and started preliminarily on retreat planning for the Commission.

The subject matter committees are listed below:

1. Committee on Education, Communications and Conference Planning

The Committee on Education, Communications, and Conference Planning facilitates the work of the Commission by the following functions:

- a. Assist in organizing an annual conference for presentation of issues related to access to justice.
- b. Make recommendations on encouraging lawyers, judges, government officials, and other public and private leaders in Hawai'i to take a leadership role in expanding access to justice.
- c. Assist in developing strategies for educating governmental leaders and the public about the importance of equal access to justice and of the problems that low-income persons in Hawai'i face in gaining access to the civil justice system. Strategies include informational briefings, communication campaigns, statewide conferences, testimony at hearings, and other means.
- d. Increase awareness of legal rights of low-income persons and where they can go when legal assistance is needed.
- e. Assist in developing a communications strategy and preparing communications consistent with that strategy.
- f. Encourage judges, lawyers, and legal services providers to prepare a series of articles on access to justice topics for publication in the *Hawaii Bar Journal* and other media.

The members of this committee in 2025 were former Dean Aviam Soifer (Chair), State of Hawai'i Representative Della Au Belatti, Rona Fukumoto, Cora Hume, Mihoko Ito, Robert J. LeClair, Judge Clarissa Malinao, Simeona Mariano, Michelle Moorhead, Carol K. Muranaka (Vice Chair), Teri-Ann Nagata, and Lorenn Walker.



Summary of Activities

- (1) Planned, recommended, and coordinated the 2025 Access to Justice Conference (Theme: "Charting the Course Toward Civil Access to Justice") held on Friday, June 20, 2025 at the William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawai'i.
- (2) Prepared a report to the Commission summarizing the 2025 Hawai'i Access to Justice Conference, including expenses, evaluations, and summaries of various conference workshops.
- (3) Prepared an application for approval of six continuing legal education credits for Hawai'i-licensed attorneys attending the 2025 Hawai'i Access to Justice Conference. Approval for the six credits was ultimately received from the HSBA.
- (4) Began preparing for possible workshop topics for the 2026 Hawai'i Access to Justice Conference.

2. Committee on Increasing Pro Bono Legal Services

The Committee on Increasing Pro Bono Legal Services aids in the work of the Commission by the following functions:

- a. Study best practices in other jurisdictions for increasing the level of pro bono services by lawyers, paralegals, and others who may assist in overcoming barriers to access to justice. Methods include developing effective recruitment campaigns.
- b. Make recommendations concerning ways to develop a culture of commitment to pro bono service among Hawai'i's lawyers.
- c. Maintain a list of providers of legal services and others who offer opportunities for pro bono service (including adjustments due to COVID-19), describe the nature of those opportunities, and explore and assist providers in increasing the opportunities they provide for such service.
- d. Make recommendations concerning ways in which to make providing pro bono service more attractive to attorneys. Methods include assisting in developing resources for the pre-screening of cases, ensuring proper training, providing support, and recognizing service.
- e. Make recommendations concerning ways to encourage law firms and others who employ lawyers (including governmental agencies



and corporate law departments) to promote increased pro bono service among their attorneys.

- f. Make recommendations concerning ways to encourage retired lawyers and judges to provide pro bono or staff legal services to low- and moderate-income persons.
- g. Assist in recruiting and staffing pro bono attorneys for the Access to Justice Room at the Honolulu District Court.
- h. Coordinating the annual Pro Bono Celebration.
- i. Make recommendations and provide advocacy in support of enhancing recruitment and retention of attorneys to work as staff members or to volunteer pro bono for non-profit providers of civil legal services in Hawai'i.

The Committee continued to work on its 2025 goals to increase pro bono participation by attorneys in the community. The Committee focused on its connection to University of Hawaii's Richardson School of Law to encourage law students to complete pro bono hours with the Commission. A pilot program was created that allows law students to work directly with Commission member lawyers to complete Access to Justice projects. A project in process focuses on law students creating training for lawyers relating to consumer debt litigation. The Committee looks forward to working with more law students to complete future pro bono projects.

In October, the Committee once again planned and coordinated the 2025 Pro Bono Celebration. This successful annual event was led by Judge Brian A. Costa, with help from both Committee and non-Committee members.

The Committee members in 2025 were Christine Daleiden (Chair), Angela Kuo Min, Jennifer Chin, Derek Kobayashi, Judge Rebecca A. Copeland, Representative Linda Ichiyama, Rachel Figueroa, Associate Justice Vladimir P. Devens, Judge Bryant Zane, Judge Kristine Yoo Nakamatsu, Judge Brian A. Costa, Tracey Wiltgen, Associate Justice Simeon R. Acoba (Ret.), Shawn L.M. Benton, Judge Jill Hasegawa, Regan Iwao, Judge Melanie May, Judge Trish K. Morikawa, and Trisha Y. Nakamura.

3. Committee on Initiatives to Enhance Civil Justice

The Committee on Initiatives to Enhance Civil Justice and Right to Counsel in Certain Civil Proceedings assists the Commission by the following functions:



- a. Develop and publish a strategic, integrated plan for statewide delivery of civil legal services to low-income residents of Hawai'i.
- b. Study best practices in other jurisdictions and develop and recommend new initiatives to expand access to justice in Hawai'i.

Summary of Activities

In 2025, the Committee on Initiatives to Enhance Civil Justice continued to look at initiatives to assist litigants with transportation to court and to continue developing proposed instructional materials for distribution to the public. The committee has also begun studying ways in which it can garner specific input from self-represented litigants on their court experiences and how the Judiciary (and individual judges) facilitated their access to justice. It is hoped that this information could provide constructive feedback that could be used to specifically improve self-represented litigants' access by educating judges and leading to the implementation of new initiatives to address concerns, barriers, or gaps. Finally, the Committee is drafting a proposal to expand the Appellate Pro Bono Program to include special education agency appeals or even expand it to include all agency appeals to respond to the need in the community for Pro Bono Appellate representation.

Members of the Committee in 2025 were Rachel Figueroa (Chair), Judge Joanna E. Sokolow, Edward Aquino, Charles Crumpton, Elizabeth Fujiwara, Craig Jerome, Patricia Kickland, Gregory Lui-Kwan, Judge John A. Montalbano, Deja Marie Ostrowski, Jessica Uchida, Leslee Matthews and Brandee Faria.

4. Committee on Overcoming Barriers to Access to Justice

The Committee on Overcoming Barriers to Access to Justice facilitates the work of the Commission by the following functions:

- a. Make recommendations concerning ways to remove impediments to accessing the justice system due to language, cultural, and other barriers and make recommendations concerning what programs should be initiated to address this barrier, which may include the following:
 - (1) Providing multilingual services, including increasing the number of available staff, pro bono attorneys and court personnel who are bilingual.



- Recommendation to prioritizing hiring personnel who are bilingual, especially in Micronesian languages.
- (2) Providing forms in multiple languages.
- (3) Providing translation services in court, administrative agencies, and with legal service providers.
 - Data from Judiciary in 2025 indicates the largest need is for Chuukese and Marshallese interpreters.
 - Data from the Disability and Communication Access Board indicates Hawaii has a severe shortage of sign language interpreters, especially those who can adapt to regional differences.
- (4) Identify state entities working on these issues to increase collaboration and share resources.
 - Committee will continue to hold two “roundtables” annually to bring together stakeholders across the judicial continuum
- (5) Examine factors around barriers to interpreter certification and make recommendations to ensure quality and availability.

b. Identify other barriers to obtaining legal assistance and make recommendations concerning ways to address them, such as through the provision of ancillary services--e.g., providing for child care during a court hearing or for necessary mental health services.

c. Seek to reduce barriers by recommending input on existing and proposed laws, court rules, regulations, procedures and policies that may affect meaningful access to justice for low- and moderate income Hawai'i residents and those with disabilities such as intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD) and those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

d. Reduce barriers encountered by self-represented litigants in the court system. Examples include using plain English, providing graphics and other easy-to-understand documents and by simplifying procedural rules. Provide continuing legal education on working with people with ID/DD and those who may be deaf or hard of hearing.

Members of the Committee in 2025 were Heather Lusk (Chair), Patricia Cookson, Simeona Mariano, Rona Fukumoto, Page Ogata, Jennifer Rose, Cynthia Tai, Malia Taum-Deenik, Kristina Toshikiyo, Della Au Belatti, Aphirak Bamrungruan, Kathryn Mayer, and Derek Kobayashi.



5. Committee on Paralegals and Other Nonlawyers

The purpose of the Committee on Paralegals and Other Non-lawyers (Committee) is to substantially increase access to civil justice in Hawai'i for those of low- and moderate-income through the utilization of paralegals and other non-lawyers.¹ Paralegals and non-lawyers possess an abundance of dedication, life experience, and willingness to serve. They are a valuable resource that can provide greater access to justice in the many instances that do not require a lawyer.

The Committee met on several occasions during 2025 to work on proposals and projects designed to enhance access to civil justice through the use of paralegals and non-lawyers.

The Committee continued to focus on membership to ensure that the work on utilizing paralegals and other non-lawyers to enhance access to civil justice continues well into the future. During 2025, the Committee welcomed one new member to join the existing membership that included three new committee members added during 2023 and two new members added during 2024. The Committee encourages anyone interested in Committee membership to apply.

During 2025, the Committee continued its work on supporting certain projects that were developed by the Committee. This included a Volunteer Court Navigator Program, an Online Volunteer Court Navigator Program, and a Volunteer Attorney and Volunteer Assistant Pilot Project.

During 2018, the Second Circuit commenced a Volunteer Court Navigator Program. This program was proposed by the Committee and the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission and authorized by order of the Hawai'i Supreme Court. The Volunteer Court Navigator Program involves having trained in-person volunteer navigators present at civil district court sessions to provide legal information in response to questions by unrepresented persons. This program has successfully operated in the Second Circuit for the past seven and one-half

¹ The 2025 members of the Committee on Paralegals and Other Non-lawyers, were: Judge Joseph E. Cardoza, Second Circuit Chief Judge (Ret.) (Chair, Access to Justice Commissioner); Kalen Sato (Hawai'i Paralegal Association) (Committee Vice-Chair and Commissioner); Gilbert Doles (Attorney); Susan Gashel; (Attorney); Monique Ibarra (Chief Executive Officer, Domestic Violence Action Center); Kimberly Koide Iwao (Attorney, Professor, and Paralegal Program Coordinator, Kapiolani Community College), Chelsey Konno (originally a Maui High School Student and now a student at John Hopkins University); Angela Lovitt (Deputy Director, Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i); Anika Bautista Ramos (Private Law Firm Paralegal), and Grant Teichman (Volunteer Legal Services Hawai'i).



years. Two new Volunteer Court Navigators were trained and sworn-in during 2025.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission proposed expansion of the Volunteer Court Navigator Program to provide similar online services via email. Originally designed to operate in the Second Circuit, the program has evolved and now is available to provide legal information beyond the borders of the Second Circuit. Today, inquiries can be received from unrepresented persons throughout the United States of America and other countries.

The Online Navigator allows a person to seek legal information via email. Persons seeking legal information send an email to a Judiciary email address. Requests for information then receive an email response from a volunteer navigator. In the future, it may be that new technology may replace this online program. This will be evaluated during 2026.

The Volunteer Attorney and Volunteer Assistant Pilot Project was designed several years ago to provide free legal representation to tenants facing eviction in the Second Circuit. Volunteer attorneys and volunteer assistants were trained to provide such services working together with Volunteer Legal Services of Hawai'i. Currently and fortunately, the needs of tenants who are not represented by a lawyer are being met by other agencies and lawyers who stepped forward to provide assistance following the Maui wildfires of 2023. Thus, this project was not called upon to provide representation during 2025. At some point in the future, this will change and attorneys will be needed to provide free legal representation to tenants facing eviction in the Second Circuit.

Consumer debt litigation has also been an area of focus for the Commission and Committee during 2025. Consumer debt cases are among the most frequently filed civil cases in Hawai'i. The vast majority of those facing consumer debt litigation are not represented by a lawyer. The Commission has been working on a program to provide access to justice in this area of the law. One component of such a program may include having navigators available to provide legal information to unrepresented debtors and creditors. This will remain an ongoing Committee and Commission project during 2026.

Utilizing paralegals to provide legal representation in certain types of cases has been the subject of considerable discussion throughout the United States. Some states have moved forward with projects to enhance access to justice through the use of paralegals. The Committee and the Commission have dealt with this topic in the past. The Committee, and subsequently the Commission, recommended using paralegals working under the supervision of a licensed attorney to represent tenants in eviction cases. The Hawai'i Supreme



Court authorized such a pilot project. Funding was obtained for this pilot project, which was to be housed in the Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i's (LASH) Oahu Office. Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances, this pilot project could not be implemented. Subsequently, LASH proceeded with a similar pilot project utilizing paralegals working under the supervision of a licensed attorney to represent person in rural area paternity cases. That pilot project has been a success. Thus, the Committee is once again re-examining the use of paralegals to provide legal representation where little or no legal representation is available to those of low- or moderate-income. The Committee's review has included the work of other jurisdictions as well as the aforementioned paternity pilot project.

The Committee remains open to projects using paralegals and other non-lawyers designed to enhance access to civil justice for those of low- and moderate-income in Hawai'i.

The members of the Committee express their sincere appreciation to the Judiciary for its leadership and assistance during 2025 and for the dedication of the many volunteers and agencies who have made the Committee's projects a reality.

6. Committee on Maximizing the Use of Available Resources for Separating and Divorcing Families in Hawai'i

This committee was formed on September 18, 2023. Its purpose is to evaluate the nature and status of pending cases involving separating and divorcing families in Hawai'i; evaluate the available resources for separating and divorcing families in Hawai'i; increase awareness of the available resources to separating and divorcing families in Hawai'i; and make recommendations for possible enactment of statutes, Family Court Rules, and/or Family Court policy and procedure directives designed to maximize the use of available resources for separating and divorcing families in Hawai'i.

In 2025, the Committee was not able to gather sufficient helpful information from our 2024 survey developed and distributed for litigants involved in divorce or custody cases and pivoted to increasing available resources in many different forms. The Committee has been developing scripts for AI-assisted instructional videos on each of the Family Court divorce forms, to be translated and interpreted into multiple languages and available on the Judiciary website. The Committee is hard at work on developing a Divorce Navigator pilot project to assist litigants through the divorce process with face-to-face meetings and tailored information. Additionally, the Committee continues to assemble a resource guide and examine processes and projects that may speed up and improve families' journeys through the divorce or custody processes. The members of this committee in 2025 were Judge Joanna E.



Sokolow (Chair), William C. Darrah, Tracey R. Wiltgen, Sara Jo Buehler, Erin Lea Lowenthal, Makia Minerbi, Michelle K. Moorhead, and Tiare Nakata.



II. 2025 HAWAII ACCESS TO JUSTICE CONFERENCE

On a sunny day on a Friday, June 20, 2025, over 250 people gathered to participate at the sixteenth Access to Justice Conference sponsored by the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission at the William S. Richardson School of Law, at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa campus.² The theme for the conference was "Charting the Course Toward Civil Access to Justice for All."

Commission Chair Judge Joseph Cardoza (ret.) highlighted the Commission's work over the past year. He spoke about the constitutional crisis that America is facing, and people being taken into police custody and removed from the country with no access to justice. He hopes that "we remain faithful to the rule of law, serve others the best we can, and stand as nonviolent advocates for equal justice for all."

Keynote speaker Hawai'i Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald began his speech:

I stand before you for my final Access to Justice Conference as your Chief Justice. While I always look forward each year to this event and the community that it brings together, today is especially bittersweet.

The very first time I spoke at this conference was in 2011, at the beginning of my first term. At the time, I remarked that "we ha[d] a real opportunity to make history in Hawai'i, by significantly expanding access to justice for people who had been left behind for far too long."³ I truly believed that. Back then, the access to justice movement was just gaining momentum since it was only a few years after the Access to Justice Commission was established.⁴

In those early days I had a sense that we were at a critical inflection point and felt bold optimism that we could affect real change. Perhaps, it was because I had only been the chief justice for less than a year and was naïve and star-struck . . . but the truth is it was evident that the work leading up to that point had set us up for the years ahead . . . just as this year's conference

² The photos are courtesy of Spencer Kimura, Director, International Programs, College of Social Sciences, University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

³

https://www.courts.state.hi.us/docs/news_and_reports_docs/access_to_justice_conference_2011.pdf

⁴ On April 24, 2008, the Hawai'i Supreme Court adopted Rule 21 of the RSCH, which established the Access to Justice Commission. The following year on June 24, 2009, the first Access to Justice Conference was held.



“Charting the Course Toward Civil Access to Justice for All,” will help us navigate into the future to continue to meet the legal needs of our community.

From those initial days, Chief Justice Recktenwald reflected on the strength of all the people involved in the access to justice movement. He remarked, “we are all connected by community and service of others.”



Chief Justice Recktenwald mentioned the strong relationships with the community partners that initiated the self-help centers across the state, which centers helped 40,000 individuals in the last 14 years. Other initiatives he described were the partnership with the Hawai'i State Library System where the librarians were trained to use the Self-Help Interactive Court Form software so they could assist people

on how to easily identify and complete the requisite civil legal forms; the Appellate Pro Bono Pilot Project, which provides volunteer attorneys to help the self-represented litigants on appeal in eligible civil cases; the Community Navigator Project that brought together leaders in the community such as coaches, teachers, pastors, and so on to become “community navigators” who would be able to identify legal issues and access resources for those who come to them for help; and the Hawai'i Legal Interagency Roundtable Project, “which was designed to increase collaboration and efficiency across government departments and break down silos to increase access to resources and improve outcomes for those we mutually serve.”

Chief Justice Recktenwald described that there were challenges that “severely tested the Judiciary’s limits to respond and adapt including the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently the Maui fires.” He said:

The fortitude and resilience of our access to justice community have never been more evident than during difficult times. Overcoming these challenges together has strengthened relationships, galvanized our resolve, and better prepared us for anything we may face in the future.

In closing, Chief Justice Recktenwald still maintained his “bold optimism”:

As you can see from the journey it took us to get to this point, every person who is part of this movement matters . . . every contribution is meaningful, whether you choose to spearhead the next access to justice



innovation, or volunteer for a shift at a self-help center . . . this work is a true reflection of our shared values to make Hawai'i a better place for all who call it home. More than anything, it underscores that living up to the constitution's promise of equal justice for all is a collective responsibility. Everyone in this room knows that this promise must be more than mere words. It must be reflected in action, in how we show up for the people we serve every day, and is grounded in the fundamental belief that every individual deserves to have their voice heard and their rights protected.

Following his address, Associate Justice Sabrina McKenna surprised the Chief Justice with a song tribute. She invited all the Judiciary staff (law clerks, former law clerks, judges, and judicial assistants) to join her in singing a parody to "I'll Remember You" (written by Kui Lee).

During the lunch break, Justice McKenna with Kalei Akau, Lehua Yim, and Troy Andrade continued the special occasion in honoring Chief Justice Recktenwald with Hawaiian melodies and graceful hula.



Morning Plenary Workshop

Judge Cardoza facilitated the morning workshop, "Civil Access to Justice for All - A Continuing Conversation" with Chief Justice Recktenwald, former Hawai'i Supreme Court Associate Justice Simeon Acoba, former Intermediate Court of Appeals Associate Judge Daniel Foley, and State Representative Della Au Belatti. Justice Acoba and Judge Foley, as past chairs of the Commission discussed the insight into the establishment of the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission and activities of the Commission during their tenures. Representative Belatti explained the role of the state legislature in access to



justice and Chief Justice Recktenwald expanded on his vision for access to justice.

Judge Foley described how individuals and organizations came together in 2006 to discuss the denial of legal access for low- and moderate-income people in Hawai'i. They formed a “hui,” which included representatives from Hawaii Justice Foundation, Hawaii State Bar Association (“HSBA”), American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii, Domestic Violence Action Center, Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i (“Legal Aid”), Na Loio-Immigrant Rights and Public Policy Center, Native Hawaiian Legal Corp. (“NHLC”), University of Hawai'i Elder Law Program, Volunteer Legal Services Hawai'i (“VLSH”), and the William S. Richardson School of Law. Former Chief Justice Ronald Moon was asked for a representative from the Judiciary and that is how Judge Foley became a member of the hui.

Judge Foley discussed how the hui surveyed all committees, task forces, and commissions across the country and concluded that it was important to have the Hawai'i Supreme Court vested. The survey found that only one in five Hawai'i residents with low/moderate incomes have their legal needs met. And only one in three individuals from that group could be served by a non-profit service provider. The areas with biggest unmet needs were housing, family law, domestic violence and consumer debt.

The first recommendation of the hui was to create a commission with representatives from the Supreme Court, bar members, legal service providers, and community members. The Commission would oversee and coordinate statewide efforts and expand access for low-income people, increase funding for non-profits and increase pro bono work. Thus Rule 21 was adopted, the Hawai'i Access to Justice was formed and the first chair was Justice Acoba.

Justice Acoba spoke about the draft of Rule 21 they prepared that would establish the Commission which was approved by the Supreme Court. He thanked David Reber and George Zweibel from Legal Aid for their founding work on Supreme Court Rule 21, which created the Commission. The first meeting of the newly formed Commission was in 2008 during the Great Recession when people lost their jobs and could not pay their mortgages. Although the Hawaii Justice Foundation offered funding, it could not be replicated, and the Commission decided the monies would be used for future matters. As a result, the Commission became an all-volunteer organization with no staff and no budget.

Along with the first vice chair Jill Hasegawa, Justice Acoba visited private law firms and government offices to request attorneys to help with pro bono work, and they signed up 16 firms at the time. The Commission initially worked through ten subject matter committees, special committees, and task forces.



Representative Della Au Belatti, Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald, Justice Simeon Acoba (ret.), Judge Daniel Foley (ret.), Judge Joseph Cardoza (ret.)

The Commission implements projects, policies, and changes to the court system to improve access to justice. Justice Acoba explained that this includes model pro bono policies, annual Hawai'i Access to Justice conferences, the annual Pro Bono Celebrations, and the change to Rule 6.1 of the Hawai'i Rules of Professional Conduct to allow for a \$500 donation in lieu of pro bono work. Justice Acoba also mentioned the Foreclosure Mediation Project on the Big Island, which was successfully accomplished by Judge Ronald Ibarra.

Justice Acoba spoke about Gary Slovin and Mihoko Ito who advocated for legislation that amended the Indigent Legal Assistance Fund, which increased monies to qualifying legal service providers from \$300,000 to \$1.6 million annually. He highlighted the various grants, which helped the Hawaii Justice Foundation, the Courts for Assessment of Access Needs, implementation of the Community Navigator Program, the Government Roundtable Program, and the establishment of the Appellate Pro Bono Program. Nationally, Hawai'i was ranked fourth in the nationwide survey of practices by the National Center for Access to Justice in 2016 and was among the top three states in the country for progress toward access to justice.

Chief Justice Recktenwald emphasized the importance of the Commission's activities and explained how self-help centers brought everyone together to learn about capabilities and develop relationships with HSBA, Legal Aid, VLSH, AmeriCorps, and county bar associations.



Chief Justice Recktenwald discussed how being recognized and engaged nationally helped obtain more funding. He added how access to justice became part of the Judiciary's budget because it is part of who we are. Chief Justice Recktenwald thanked Senator Brian Schatz and Senator Mazie Hirono for their support of civil legal services.

A video of President of Legal Services Corp (LSC) John Levi was played, and John Levi spoke about the proposal of the Office of Management and Budget that seeks to eliminate LSC and put at risk essential legal protections. Mr. Levi explained that if LSC is not sufficiently funded then its grantees would have to downsize programs, reduce staff, shut down offices, close legal resource clinics and turn away eligible clients. He added that in Hawai'i more than 21,000 people would lose vital legal assistance and they include children, domestic violence survivors, older Americans, and veterans.

Mr. Levi emphasized that defunding LSC would undermine a core American value that is equal access to justice. The founders of our country believed that the foundation of a just society was ensuring access to justice. He encouraged everyone to join efforts to protect LSC's funding, similar to the powerful letter of support for LSC funding to the U.S. Congress signed by Chief Justice Recktenwald and other state Supreme Court justices. He highlighted this letter by quoting "the promise of justice must be real to all who seek it, justice for only those who can afford it is neither justice for all nor justice at all."

Representative Au Belatti described her commitment and journey with access to justice. She recalls how the access to justice movement in 2006 mirrored her career as a legislator when she was first elected. Justice Acoba asked her to join the Commission, and she attended a similar conference in 2011. Representative Au Belatti spoke about how excited she was to replicate this conference in Hawai'i and failed at her first attempt in her community. She did not give up and remained optimistic. She spoke about the power of the voluntary-based Commission and praised the executive branch for using their budget to support the movement.

The Commission invested the money received from Justice for All to bring together stakeholders and invited service providers to help identify the gaps and needs in the community. Through this interagency roundtable, Representative Au Belatti spoke about how amazing it was to see department heads, deputies, and line workers speaking with each other to solve problems in the community. She recalled a Zoom meeting in which they discussed housing issues and how it was vital to bring legislators together with judges. As a result, the best housing program utilized was created.



Afternoon Workshops

What follows are a few summaries of the various afternoon concurrent workshops at the conference.⁵

“Elder Law, Special Needs, and Access to Justice”

James H. Pietsch, Professor of Law, Director, UHELP, and Scott C. Suzuki, who is the principal of his own law firm, provided updates on issues in elder law and related issues in disability law.

James Pietsch first provided an overview of elder law, which is the legal practice of counseling and representing older persons or their representatives. It is defined by the client, not by any particular area of law and is one of the fastest-growing legal client populations in the United States and globally. He then addressed legal and practical issues regarding diminished capacity including assessment of capacity and legal facets of diminished capacity.

With respect to incapacitated adults, he provided a brief overview of guardianship, conservatorship, and their alternatives, including court jurisdiction and proceedings with an emphasis on the importance of alternatives in order to help preserve autonomy and self-determination while seeking added levels of protection for the older person.

Pietsch then discussed proposed, deferred and adopted new laws. Due to deferral of a proposed change to the guardianship and conservatorship statutes through an adoption of The Uniform Guardianship, Conservatorship, and Other Protective Arrangements Act in Hawai'i, two new interim bills were passed by the 2025 legislature and sent to the governor:

- A Pilot Program Guardianship and Conservatorship, which establishes a two-year pilot program in the Probate Court and Family Court of the First Circuit to fund certain guardianship- and conservatorship-related court resources in situations where the respondent does not have sufficient funds to pay for one or more of

⁵ Summaries of the following workshops can be found at www.hawaiijustice.org: “New Approaches to Civil Access to Justice”; “Elder Law, Special Needs, and Access to Justice”; and “Access to Justice for Workers” prepared by the respective presenters and also summaries of the plenary morning and afternoon sessions prepared by Simeona Mariano and the closing plenary remarks of Senator Karl Rhoads are also included.



the resources and the court has deemed the resource or resources beneficial.

- A Supported Decision-Making Agreements law, which supports a process where a qualified adult has made or is making decisions by using friends, family members, professionals, or other people the qualified adult trusts to assist the individual.

Finally, Pietsch addressed the proposed new Uniform Health Care Decisions Act (modified) which was recommitted in the last days of the 2025 legislative session, but which may be addressed again in 2026. The proposed law would, among other matters:

- Address both advance health care directives and advance mental health care directives within the same statutory framework and would allow an individual to assent to a "Ulysses clause" in an advance mental health care directive, which allows an individual to include an instruction that prevents the individual from revoking the advance directive if the individual is experiencing a psychiatric or psychological event specified in the directive;
- Expand upon the framework for determining whether an individual has capacity; and
- Change the witnessing requirements under existing law.

This complex and lengthy proposed statute would, if enacted, have a significant impact on healthcare decision-making and the provision of healthcare across the state.

Scott Suzuki discussed issues in disability law, including financing long-term care and special needs trusts. He began with the premise that, with approximately 80 million Americans on Medicaid and 65 million Americans receiving a Social Security benefit each month, and the trillions of dollars required to finance these programs, special needs planning impacts everyone. "We are all care recipients, care givers, and investors in each other."

Suzuki then summarized the successes of the key public benefit programs involved in special needs planning, including the Supplemental Security Income and Medicaid programs. Despite these successes, emerging laws, demographics, economics, and policies threaten to limit access to justice and quality of life for countless Americans. The question is: Are our gold standards of practice keeping up with our realities?



James Pietsch and Scott Suzuki

He outlined conflicts between our existing policies and our emerging needs. The conflicts, which include the unsustainable cost of our public benefit programs with a diminishing population available to support them, will force us to reimagine what “special needs planning” can be. Efforts to address these needs will require us to explore

non-traditional areas of special needs laws, like taxation, immigration, labor, education, and criminal justice, while improving and expanding our advocacy through existing tools such as special needs trusts, pooled trusts, and innovations from the private sector.

“Building Disaster Resilience by Addressing Heirs’ Property”

Sharla Manley, Of Counsel Attorney for Lahui Services at Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation (NHLC), Keoni Shultz, partner with Cades Schutte’s litigation department, Debbie Tanakaya, attorney with estate planning law firm of Sterling & Tucker, joined moderator Devon Haia, Equal Justice Works Disaster Resilience Fellow with NHLC, to discuss the legal issues that arise after a disaster regarding heirs’ property.

Heirs’ property is family-owned land that is jointly owned by descendants of a deceased person whose estate did not clear probate. The descendants, or heirs, have the right to use the property, but they do not have a clear or marketable title to the property since the estate issues remain unresolved. Heirs’ property can create clouded title, prevent the ability to secure a loan, and even expose the property to a forced sale.

Heirs’ property is not an issue unique to Hawai‘i – many families across the continental United States face heirs’ property issues. However, the laws



regarding heirs' property in Hawai'i vary slightly and some issues surrounding heirs' property may be unique to Hawai'i. Heirs' property issues on the continent focus on the loss of intergenerational wealth. In Hawai'i, to many, land is priceless because it is sovereignty. Thus, the stakes are much different because instead of considering the dollar figure for a piece of property, some people are facing total displacement from their ancestral homeland.

The panelists for this topic were brought together to showcase their unique perspective and experiences on heirs' property issues in Hawai'i.

Keoni Schultz, a partition action and quiet title attorney, provided background information on how heirs' property can lead to complicated, expensive litigation and forced judicial sales. For partition actions in Hawai'i, the sales prices of property in a partition action generally are less than market price, and since reasonable attorneys' fees and costs are traditionally awarded from the sale proceeds of the subject property, a lawsuit is categorically "self-cannibalizing" as to a property's equity. In order for owners of heirs' property to retain their family land, they usually must have cash to buy the other heirs' interests because it is almost impossible to obtain financing to do so.

Schultz also discussed key legal principles and rulings related to litigating heirs' property, including the high burden to prove adverse possession among cotenants, the due process and diligence required to identify and serve cotenants, and the limits on partition in kind.

Sharla Manley discussed heirs' property in the context of disaster recovery and response. She defended Hawaiian families from quiet title and partition lawsuits for several years at NHLC before turning her focus on families affected by the 2023 Maui wildfires. Title and heirs' property issues quickly arise after a disaster. When survivors of a disaster do not have paper title to their family land, they experience hardship dealing with mortgages, insurance policies, debris removal, and long-term recovery assistance programs for disaster survivors.

Manley posited that one must start to address heirs' property before disaster strikes as a form of disaster resilience and preparedness on par with a grab-and-go emergency kit. She identified concrete legal instruments that lawyers can prepare to foster the disaster resilience of communities and families, including:

1. Family land trusts;
2. Community land trusts;
3. Transfer on death deeds, which allow individuals to pass on their interest in land to their descendants without probate;

4. Power of attorney for heirs to consolidate authority to act in the wake of a disaster.

These efforts are critical for Native Hawaiian communities especially due to the tendency of disasters to result in land grabs and gentrification, which threaten place-based traditional and cultural practices. Native Hawaiian well-being and self-determination are undermined by disaster capitalism and displacement.



Keoni Shultz, Sharla Manley, Debbie Tanakaya, Devon Haia

power of attorney, or transfer on death deeds. A well-drafted estate plan will ensure that the estate passes to whomever is chosen, when, and the manner it is carried out. The estate plan should do much more than simply determine what happens to estate assets after death, including protection if incapacity strikes and ensuring loved ones are provided for. An estate plan will likely be one of the most important set of legal documents created over the course of a lifetime.

Access to justice means educating the community on heirs' property and the issues that can arise, offering affordable legal services to prevent it, and ultimately advocating for a justice system that does not result in the loss of the ancestral home.

“New Approaches to Civil Access to Justice”

Judge Thomas Haia, Dina Shek, legal director of the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children in Hawai'i, and Aphirak Bamrungruan, Court Services Division Manager for the First Circuit of the Hawai'i State Judiciary, joined

Debbie Tanakaya, an estate planning attorney, rounded out the discussion offering ways to prevent problems for heirs' property. Even the most basic estate plan ensures that a homeowner can decide what happens to assets after death instead of allowing the state intestate succession laws to dictate the fate of those assets. An estate plan that addresses heirs' property issues could include revocable living trusts, a



moderator Heather Lusk, executive director of Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center to discuss Hawaii's commitment to access civil justice in light of federal changes in policy and funding.

On March 6, 2025, the Hawai'i Supreme Court released a statement "Affirming Principles of Equal Justice for All" which detailed the Judiciary's efforts to provide fair and respectful consideration in courtrooms and the ongoing commitment to increase access to justice for all. On March 7, 2025, the court released "Hawaii Judiciary re-affirms Commitment to Providing Language Access to the Courts" which committed to continuing to honor both English and 'ōlelo Hawai'i are the state's official languages and therefore available to all participants of the judicial process. The statement emphasized the importance, especially in the islands, of enhancing language access with the provision of court interpreters for people with limited English proficiency, or speech or hearing impairments.



Aphirak Bamrungruan, Dina Shek, Heather Lusk, Judge Thomas Haia

Judge Thomas Haia started the discussion with an overview of the Community Outreach Court (COC), which was founded in 2017 as a project funded through the legislature with the purpose of reaching communities where people experiencing homelessness are frequently found to work with eligible individuals to clear non-violent non-felony offenses in exchange for community service hours. Additionally, the COC integrates services such as case management, legal aid, connection to benefits and housing support into the COC sessions that are done in the community. Currently, COC operates in four communities across Oahu once a month and has conducted numerous service fairs to bring services to the unsheltered community. In the 2025 session, the Hawai'i legislature made the COC a permanent court in the First Circuit (HB



280) which will allow the collaboration of the Judiciary, the Public Defender's Office and the Office of the Prosecuting Attorney to continue to seek funding for this successful program.

Aphriak Bamrungruan spoke about the Judiciary's reaffirmation and commitment to language access following the Supreme Court memorandum, which was released just five days after Executive Order 14224, which designated English as the national language and rescinded prior federal language access requirements under the previous order (13166). Bamrungruan highlighted not only the Judiciary's continued commitment to language access since 11% of Hawaii residents have Limited English Proficiency (LEP) but also the unwavering commitment to 'oleo Hawai'i. 'oleo Hawai'i language interpreters were provided in 18 court cases in fiscal year 2024, with over 8,400 proceedings statewide where an interpreter was utilized for people with LEP. The most common language service requested was for Chuukese with just over a third of all interpreters providing access for the Chuukese community. Recent increases in payment for interpreters, ensuring access to over thirty languages, and increasing investment in interpreter recruitment and training will support expanding the pool of interpreters and therefore continuing to ensure access to this much needed resource.

Dina Shek shared information about the Medical-Legal Partnership (MLP) which is a project of the William S. Richardson School of Law. Hundreds of the nation's leading health organizations integrate patient-centered legal services into their care delivery to address the communities' health-related social needs such as housing, income supports, access to public benefits and family law. These direct legal services are offered on-site at health clinics such as federally qualified health centers and support the whole-person approach to health and well-being. A component of the program includes advocacy and "know your rights" education and training with non-profit organizations and their clients, which allows communities to determine their own priorities and make their voices heard. This has been most apparent within the COFA communities where the COFA Community Action Network was established to connect, empower, and uplift communities disproportionately impacted by social determinants of health. The concept of "community engagement through community lawyering" is at the core of MLP.

The panel engaged in an interactive discussion with the audience, which included the importance of connection within the different access to justice programs. Connection on the system level and how all would benefit from coming out of our siloes and coordinating and collaborating. Connection on an individual level is where healing can occur, and whether it is taking more time in the COC for connection with court participants, or the importance of having interpreters available so the LEP community can better connect to the judicial



process, or how communities coming together drives change – connection will continue to be a primary pathway for increasing access to justice.

“Access to Justice for Workers”

Isis Usborne, Legal Intern, Hawai'i Worker's Center, as moderator with panelists, Jeremy O'Steen, attorney, Miyashita & O'Steen, Nelson Salvador, Director of Organizing, Hawai'i Worker's Center, and Lisa Grandinetti, Lead Organizer, UNITE HERE Local 5 encouraged a conversation about justice for workers between members of the legal profession and judiciary in Hawai'i and those who organize and fight for labor rights across the islands.

Workers have been the backbone of the development of popular rights throughout history and across the globe, and this trend is especially prevalent here in Hawai'i. However, workers' rights are being steadily eroded in favor of pro-business policies that are widening the gap between the very rich and very poor, lowering the quality of life of most people.



Jeremy O'Steen, Nelson Salvador, Lisa Grandinetti, Isis Usborne

necessarily deter employers from committing the offense. This is likely because of low awareness of wage theft as an issue, combined with the fact that it is easier and more expedient for workers to simply find another job. The high cost of living incentivizes employees to prioritize finding alternative income rather than using time to take up confusing legal processes that are difficult to win. Overall, it is difficult for workers to know how or where to proceed when it comes to asserting their rights.

Lisa Grandinetti similarly asserted that the biggest challenge facing workers is how to organize themselves and therefore position themselves as

Nelson Salvador asserted that in directly organizing with workers, one finds that wage theft is a prevalent issue, along with instances of wrongful termination and immigration issues that intersect with labor laws. He reported that 19 workers at Makalani Restaurant in Waikīkī were given paychecks that bounced. While wage theft is a crime, this does not



leaders. She explained that this does not only mean planning rallies, picket lines, and strikes it means meeting other workers face-to- face, on a daily basis, in order to identify, recruit, and train each other as leaders. In this work, the biggest barrier is fear.

In places considering union representation, workers are led to believe that a union is an entity separate from the workers instead of understanding it as an organization made up of workers themselves. Thus, a solution to this barrier is face-to-face connections between organizers and in-shop leaders through one-on-one conversations, agitations, and inspirations, getting core groups of leaders in workplaces and other community spaces to show leadership.

Jeremy O'Steen discussed the procedural barriers to fair, efficient, and speedy compensation for the workers. He briefly described the worker's compensation model, highlighting how it only allows a worker to recover up to two-thirds of their wages in addition to some limited medical coverage that is difficult to access because of the multiple levels of approval needed. In order to be made fully whole after a workplace injury (i.e for full wages, pain, suffering, loss of enjoyment of life, any emotional distress, and the like), a worker must be able to show third party liability, which is difficult to prove because of the different kinds of insurance policies that employers are usually covered by.

Overall, participants agreed that more needs to be done to fight for worker's rights, and that while incremental reforms might meet some of those needs, broader systemic overhauls of how the economy functions will also be necessary to building a future where the health and safety of all people is prioritized.

Other workshops

The other workshops included the following:

- “Strengthening Housing Stability Through Early Eviction Mediation” with Clyde Namuo, facilitator, volunteer mediator with The Mediation Center of the Pacific (“MCP”); Judge Jeffrey Crabtree (ret.), Director of the Judiciary’s Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution; Bevanne Bowers, executive director of the Maui Mediation Services; and Roberta Hickey-Gomez, Special Programs Innovator, at MCP.
- “Immigration Crisis” with Corey Park, facilitator, board president of The Legal Clinic, which provides legal services to low-income immigrants; Liza Ryan Gill, executive director of the Hawai'i Coalition for Immigrant Rights; Stephanie Sevilla, postgraduate fellow at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa William S. Richardson



School of Law Refugee and Immigration Law Clinic; and Neribel Chardon, registered Spanish interpreter with The Legal Clinic.

- “Family Courts and Access to Justice” with Judges Dyan Medeiros, Courtney Naso, Robert J. Brown, Andrew Park, and Darien Ching Nagata.
- “Are You Being Replaced? Innovations in Access to Justice” with Judge Joseph Cardoza (ret.) as facilitator, Hawai'i Supreme Court Justice Vladimir Devens, and Matthew Stubenberg, Innovator in Residence at the William S. Richardson School of Law.
- “Restorative Justice and Special Education” with State Representative Della Au Belatti as facilitator, Judge Kirstin Hamman, Kathryn Mayer, and Chastity Imamura.

Charting the Course Toward Civil Access to Justice for All

The conference closed with an exciting session with Calvin Pang, retired faculty member and professor at William S. Richardson School of Law as moderator, Senator Karl Rhoads, former Dean Aviam Soifer, Robert LeClair, executive director of Hawaii Justice Foundation, and Rachel Figueroa, executive director of Volunteer Legal Services Hawai'i.

Rachel Figueroa spoke about the uncertainty of federal funding to meet social service needs in Hawai'i. There is pressure for agencies to do more with less and how clients are more aggravated and stressed. As people lose funding or funds were frozen, there was a rapid increase of people under the federal poverty level by at least 10 percent.

Senator Karl Rhoads, Chair of the State Senate Committee on Judiciary, presented an overview of funding in criminal cases and the indigent defendant's constitutional right to counsel. He explained that there are federal and state constitutional protections for a criminal defendant to be provided counsel. From a legislator's point of view, this makes decisions about criminal access to justice easier as compared to the civil side.

Senator Rhoads highlighted House Bill 396 that was signed into law by Governor Josh Green and increased the rate for court-appointed counsel for the first time in 20 years. The hourly rate for court-appointed counsel handling criminal matters increased from \$90 to \$150, and the maximum allowable fees for felony cases doubled to \$12,000. The legislature also passed House Bill 398,



which increased fees to \$150 per hour for court-appointed attorneys and guardians ad litem in family court cases.

Generally, on the civil side, Senator Rhoads pointed out there are many people who are on their own when they need legal services. Ironically, the National Center for Access to Justice ranked Hawai'i as fifth among the states that provide access to justice to pro se litigants--those who need interpreters and people with disabilities. The Legislature continues to provide funding for civil legal services to individuals with lower incomes and added \$1.75 million to the \$1.2 million base budget.

Senator Rhoads said that we need to improve access to attorneys. There are family court cases such as child protective and divorce cases, where the court may appoint an attorney. He believes expansion is needed in certain areas where decisions are impactful and important that the state should provide legal representation to those with lower incomes. He mentioned the pilot programs in the probate and family courts that the legislature established and more grants for service providers as ways to help serve the lower income community.

Robert LeClair discussed how the federal government plans to cut funding because they do not believe it makes a difference if someone has access to legal services. The way we get through this type of crisis is to draw strength from the work we are doing here in Hawai'i. He highlighted the amazing efforts we have made here with access to justice and the good spirit we have as a group.

LeClair believes that better access to justice may occur by increasing the use of paralegals. He recalled the Kapiolani Community College paralegal program that involved training 30 students at Legal Aid, which was led at the time by Eric Seitz, and the program raised the number of clients served from 4,500 to 13,500 over a one-year period. LeClair believes this is a model that could be replicated here.

Aviam Soifer, former Dean of William S. Richardson School of Law, spoke about how the worst is yet to come, however, he remains optimistic. He believes that the ratings mentioned earlier do not adequately reflect how good we are and how well we are doing compared to the rest of the country. Dean Soifer expressed how we have great relationships that need to be recognized and that words and facts matter in times of crisis.

Hawai'i is a face-to-face culture and it sets us apart. Dean Soifer discussed the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion. He highlighted the Ulu Lehua Program of the William S. Richardson School of Law, which strives to admit those who have overcome adversity and show promise in helping underserved communities. He said we should be proud of this admissions program and



remember that is what we stand for in Hawai'i. Dean Soifer concluded with how facts can overcome optimism but that gets you to hope which can sustain you.



Calvin Pang



Avi Soifer, Robert LeClair, Senator Karl Rhoads, Rachel Figueroa



III. 2025 PRO BONO CELEBRATION

National Pro Bono Celebration Week takes place across the country during the month of October. This year, the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission (“Commission”) celebrated its thirteenth annual Pro Bono Celebration at the Hawai'i Supreme Court. The Celebration allows the Commission to recognize and thank the attorneys and individuals who generously donate their time to assist hundreds of people each year, to recognize those volunteers who have gone above and beyond to assist legal service providers in helping the public and to inspire Hawai'i's young people to volunteer. Equally important, the Celebration is a reminder of the importance of pro bono work and helping those in need. It is only through the efforts of the many individuals who dedicate hundreds of hours of pro bono service that Hawai'i continues to increase access to justice for all.

This year's Pro Bono Celebration was supported by the Hawai'i Access to Justice Commission, Hawai'i Justice Foundation (“HJF”), the Hawai'i State Bar Association (“HSBA”), and the Hawai'i State Bar Foundation (“HSBF”). The Celebration's honorees included eight outstanding individuals who volunteer their services for legal service providers, over one hundred attorneys, law firms, and organizations who volunteer for the First Circuit District and Family Court Access to Justice Rooms, as well as the Appellate Pro Bono and Mediation Programs, and seven student essay contest winners from public and private high schools throughout the state.

Judge Joseph Cardoza (ret.) opened the celebration by stating:

Pro bono is an area of emphasis for the Commission. We encourage pro bono service in both the private and public sectors. Thank you to those who have responded to the call. This celebration is one way of emphasizing the importance of your contributions and encouraging others to do the same.

Retired Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald recognized Judge Cardoza for his inspiring work in the community and as chair of the Access to Justice Commission. Chief Justice Recktenwald went on to praise the Access to Justice Room, which has assisted over 40,000 people since its inception. Chief Justice Recktenwald recognized the pro bono attorneys who provided services through the legal service providers, the volunteer appellate attorneys, and the future volunteers who wrote impactful winning high school students essays.

Justice Simeon Acoba (ret.) recognized Tracey Wiltgen for twenty years of organizing the Pro Bono Celebration. Justice Acoba noted that pro bono service



is for the betterment of the public and commended the commitment, the collaboration and courage of the pro bono awardees.

The honorees who were selected by the legal services providers in 2025 were as follows:

American Civil Liberties Union of Hawai'i

The American Civil Liberties Union (“ACLU”) of Hawai'i is a private, non-profit, non-partisan organization that has protected the civil rights and civil liberties of the Hawaiian Islands since its inception in 1965. ACLU works with community partners and volunteers to ensure that the government does not violate fundamental constitutional rights for everyone through lobbying, litigation, and public education. ACLU recognized Robert Miyashita and Jeremy O'Steen of Miyashita & O'Steen, LLC, for their work with the ACLU.



Hawai'i Justice Foundation

The HJF is an independent, tax-exempt grantmaking organization that was established to be a vehicle for philanthropic law-related projects in Hawai'i. HJF recognized Bill Hunt, President of the HJF and founding partner of Dentons US.



Legal Aid Society of Hawaii

The Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i ("LASH") provides free legal services for civil matters to individuals who meet certain income criteria. LASH's mission is to address the critical legal needs in the State of Hawai'i through high-quality legal advocacy, outreach, and education in the pursuit of fairness and justice. LASH also partners with the Judiciary and the HSBA to maintain the Access to Justice Rooms and self-help centers available in the courthouses across the state.

This year, LASH honored Lloyd Lim. Executive Director David Kopper thanked Mr. Lim for volunteering at the Honolulu Access to Justice Room since 2021. Mr. Lim provided over 200 hours of pro bono assistance at the Access to Justice Room and goes the extra mile to pick up vacant shifts, both remotely and in person.





Hawai'i State Bar Association

The HSBA's mission is "to unite and inspire Hawai'i's lawyers to promote justice, serve the public, and improve the legal profession." The HSBA recognized Rhonda Griswold, former president of HSBA. During her term, she quickly organized attorneys and pro bono volunteers to respond to the deadly wildfires in Lahaina, Maui.

Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice

The Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice ("HFRJ") is an educational entity that works to help individuals and organizations live cooperatively and peacefully. HFRJ provides education, training, and program development for schools, courts, hospitals, prisons, government agencies, NGOs, and others based on a group's unique needs for peacemaking and conflict management skill building. HFRJ designs, researches, writes about, and publishes the outcomes of its innovative projects to contribute to best practices and evidence-based knowledge about what can help increase peace, civic engagement, healing, and reconciliation for individuals and communities. HFRJ is working to divert social problem-solving from the legal system to community and evidence-based solutions.

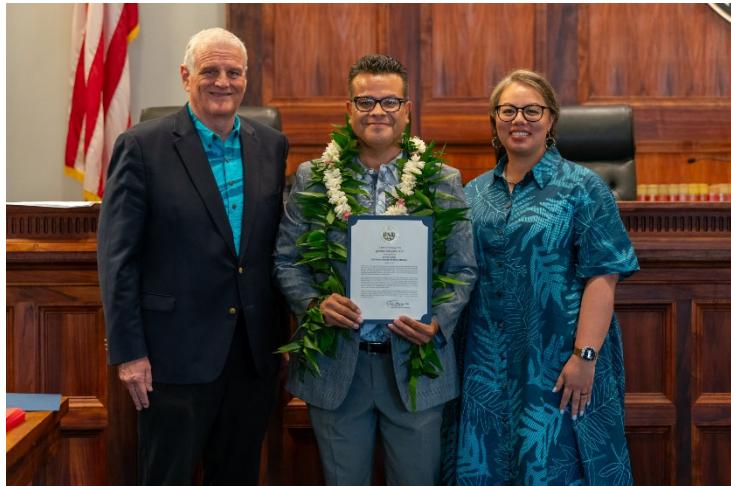


Director Lorenn Walker celebrated Marianita Lopez who generously contributed her time and expertise to a wide range of their programs, including the federal restorative justice pilot with the U.S. District Court for Hawai'i and Hawai'i state prisons, the annual parole completion celebrations, the women's prison education pilot, and the long-running family law clinic at the women's prison.

Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation

Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation (NHLC) is a non-profit that protects and advances Native Hawaiian identity and culture. NHLC carries out its mission by integrating Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) values into the practice of law and advocacy in courts and before administrative agencies. The work contributes to the protection and preservation of Native Hawaiian culture,

identity, health, and well-being. NHLC provides Native Hawaiian families and communities with legal advocates to navigate legal challenges in which Native Hawaiian rights are at stake.



Executive Director Makalika Naholowaa honored Javier Garcia. Mr. Garcia represented a team at Perkins Coie LLP, for pro bono service co-counseling with NHLC and the Center for Reproductive Rights in the *Kaho'ohanohano v. State of Hawai'i, et al* case. In July 2024, the litigation team was able to secure a statewide preliminary injunction preventing enforcement of the law against traditional and customary practitioners until a meaningful pathway for securing an exemption was available. Since then, Act 28 has been enacted, providing a clear exemption for Native Hawaiian traditional and customary birthing practices from state midwifery licensure requirements since May 2025.

The Mediation Center of the Pacific

The Mediation Center of the Pacific ("MCP") is a non-profit community service organization that provides affordable and accessible mediation to the local community. MCP brings people together to facilitate conversations between each other and help them negotiate agreements that work for them. MCP honored Hope Bennett, who is a mediator, specializing in workplace conflict resolution. A former





labor and employment attorney with Goodsill Anderson Quinn & Stifel, Ms. Bennett regularly mediates some of the most challenging cases. MCP's Executive Director Tracey Wiltgen noted that between August 2024 and July 2025, Ms. Bennett mediated sixty-five cases totaling 162.5 hours.

Volunteer Legal Services of Hawai'i

Volunteer Legal Services of Hawai'i ("VLSH") initially started as a project by the HSBA Young Lawyer's Division to provide pro bono legal services to the community and has been providing free legal services for the low to moderate-income community for almost forty years. VLSH also provides education and outreach to individuals so they know the type of services available to assist them in their time of need. There are approximately two hundred individual attorneys and law firms that currently volunteer their time with VLSH to assist with services.



VLSH honored Shannon Hackett, partner at Coates, Frey and Hackett. Ms. Hackett provided over 230 pro bono hours in family law during the VLSH neighborhood pop-up clinics. Executive Director Rachel Figueroa noted that Ms. Hackett gave over 230 pro bono hours during her many years of pro bono service providing valuable family law counsel through a wide range of services.

Honolulu District Court Access to Justice Room

The Honolulu District Court Access to Justice Room provides free legal advice to unrepresented litigants involved in civil cases. Self-represented litigants are able to ask questions and get free legal advice about landlord-tenant matters, credit card, and debt collection cases, contract cases, such as personal loans, car repairs and personal service cases, tort cases, and temporary restraining orders.

Judge Melanie May thanked and recognized the individual volunteer attorneys. Judge May also thanked the Honolulu District Court Access to Justice Room volunteer law firms and organizations including Bickerton Law Group LLLP, Bronster Fujichaku Robbins, Cades Schutte LLP, Carlsmith Ball LLP, Case



Lombardi, Chun Kerr LLP, Corporation Counsel, Damon Key Leong Kupchak Hastert, Dentons, Goodsill Anderson Quinn & Stifel, Government Lawyers Section, Hawai'i Filipino Lawyers Association, Hawai'i Women Lawyers, Marr Jones & Wang, Office of Disciplinary Counsel, Schlack Ito, Starn O'Toole Marcus & Fisher, and Yamamoto Caliboso Hetherington.

Kapolei Family Court Access to Justice Room

The Kapolei Access to Justice Room (“KAJR”) provides limited legal advice regarding family law matters by volunteer attorneys. The volunteer attorneys for KAJR offer their time, expertise, and guidance to individuals on a variety of family court civil issues, including divorce, paternity, custody or visitation, child support adoptions, and guardianships.

Judge Dyan M. Medeiros acknowledged the individuals who volunteered at KAJR including Kevin S. Adaniya, Amberlynn O. Alualu, Sarah Jo Buehler, William Darrah, Richard J. Diehl, Mari Lei Kishimoto Doi, P. Gregory Frey, Shannon Hackett, Ann S. Isobe; Lynnae L.L. Lee, Elsa F.M. McGehee, Dyan K. Mitsuyama, Paula Nakata, Alan Y. Okamoto, Gemma-Rose Poland Soon, Ellen B. Politano, Stefanie Prinsloo, Manmeet Rana, James Rooney, Gregory L. Ryan, Jeffrey Sales, Jacqueline E. Thurston, and Molly Turpin.

Family Court Volunteer Settlement Master Program

The Volunteer Settlement Master (“VSM”) Program was established in 2004 to assist divorcing spouses and unmarried couples with children to resolve their custody and financial issues by making fair and workable agreements with each other, as an alternative to litigating those issues before the Family Court. The VSM Program is a collaboration between the Family Court, the Family Law Section (“FLS”) of the HSBA, and MCP. Licensed family law attorneys are appointed by the Senior Judge of the Family Court to serve as VSMs. A VSM will typically be appointed by the Family Court following a conference conducted in response to a request by one divorcing spouse to set the case for trial. The Family Court may also assign a VSM to address pre-divorce, post-divorce, and paternity issues.

Judge Medeiros thanked the VSM Program volunteer attorneys including Kainani Alvarez, John Bryant, Nicole Cummings, Thomas D. Farrell, Gregory Frey, Debbie Jew, Timothy Luria, Anthony A. Perrault, Stephenie Rezents, and Christopher Thomas.



Appellate Pro Bono Program

The Appellate Pro Bono Program is a joint effort of the Judiciary, the HSBA's Appellate Division, and VLSH to match volunteer attorneys with self-represented litigants who are parties to an appeal. Cases in the program are limited to non-criminal appeals in the following civil matters: foreclosure, summary possession, employment discrimination, worker's compensation, wrongful termination, denial of unemployment benefits, state tax appeals, probate matters, and paternity and non-married custody cases. Daniel Gluck, Appellate Pro Bono Co-Coordinator, thanked the Appellate Pro Bono volunteer attorneys including Branden T. Nakahara and David Harada-Stone. Mr. Gluck noted long-time volunteer attorney David Harada-Stone successfully represented three Native Hawaiian appellants in a quiet title action involving land on Moloka'i.

Appellate Mediation Program

The Appellate Mediation Program started in 1995 to offer an alternative to litigation on appeal and for individuals to work with experienced mediators to look at options that might not have been otherwise thought of to resolve without the cost of litigation on appeal. The program settles an average of fifty-three percent of cases each year.

Anne Marie Smoke, Appellate Mediation Program Administrator for the Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution at the Hawai'i State Judiciary, thanked the volunteer mediators including Judge Joel E. August (ret.), Sidney Ayabe, Corlis J. Chang, Louis L.C. Chang, Charles W. Crumpton, William Darrah, Judge James E. Duffy (ret.), Judge Mahilani E.K. Hiatt, Judge Douglas H. Ige (ret.), Sidney Kanazawa, Judge Walter S. Kirimitsu (ret.), Judge Douglas S. McNish (ret.), Richard C. Mosher, Judge Maura M. Okamoto (ret.), Judge Shackley F. Raffetto (ret.), Judge Allene K. Suemori (ret.), Owen K. Tamamoto, and Judge Michael A. Town (ret.).

The High School Student Essay Award Recipients

Each year, the Commission sponsors a high school essay contest to promote understanding and awareness of the importance of volunteerism in the community. This year's theme: "How Does Volunteering Help Your Community." The Commission received essay submissions from public and private high school students throughout the State in grades 10 through 12, with the awardees from Oahu, Kauai, Maui, East Hawai'i, and West Hawai'i, all receiving the top student awards. Each student awardee received a \$500 cash prize, and an additional \$100 award for educational purposes was given to a teacher or advisor named by the student awardee. The law firms and individuals sponsoring this year's



essay contest, who donated the cash prizes were Damon Key Leong Kupchak Hastert, Lukela and Kobayashi, LLP, Gilbert C. Doles AAL, Miyashita & O'Steen LLC, Horovitz Tilley LLLC, Schlueter Kwiat & Kennedy, and The Law Office of Pedric Arrisgado.

Nicholas Ernst introduced the student essay awards and stated that “each of our winners has demonstrated a deep understanding of the importance of giving back and making a positive impact in their communities” Mr. Ernst then acknowledged the essay judges.

The preliminary judges for the essay contest included Judge Robert Brown, Judge Stephanie Char, Judge Michelle Comeau, Judge Christopher Dunn, Judge Thomas Haia, Judge Jessi Hall, Judge Kirstin Hamman, Judge Jeffrey Hawk, Judge David Hayakawa, Judge Karin Holma, Judge Denise Kawatachi, Judge Erika Ireland, Judge Shirley Kawamura, Judge Kanani Laubach, Judge Annalisa Bernard Lee, Judge Lesley Maloian, Judge Gregory Meyers, Judge Dyan Mitsuyama, Judge Courtney Naso, Judge Jeffrey Ng, Judge Maria Penn, Judge Kenneth Shimozono, Judge Joanna Sokolow, Judge Sonya Toma, Judge Taryn Tomasa, Judge Kimberly Tsuchiya, and Judge Kristine Yoo. The finalist judges for the essay contest were Chief Justice Recktenwald (ret.); 2025 HSBA Vice President Kristin Izumi-Nitao, HSBA President-Elect Mark K. Murakami, and Hawai'i Department of Education's Deputy Superintendent Heidi Armstrong.

The 2025 essay award recipients were: Kenton Chan (Punahou School); Jackson Pomai Savala (Kamehameha Schools); Joshua Tom (Campbell High School); Gabrielle Shimamoto (Kapa'a High School); Aiden Yap (Henry Perrine Baldwin High School); Gracie Anderle (Kealakehe High School); and Kiley Brown (Waiakea High School).

The Commission is grateful to everyone who supported and participated in the 2025 Pro Bono Celebration.