

Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services

Strengthening the Delivery of Civil Legal Help to Vulnerable Tennesseans



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TN Ranks in Top 10 for Providing Access to Courts

Nashville, Tenn. — Tennessee ranks ninth in United States for providing access to its courts, according to the 2016 Justice Index, a nationwide study that ranks states according to their adoption of selected best practices for ensuring access to justice. Furthermore, Tennessee takes the No. 1 ranking in the Southeast.

The Supreme Court of Tennessee deemed access to justice the No. 1 strategic initiative in 2008 and formed the Access to Justice Commission, which has since accomplished innovations such as JusticeforallTN.com, promoted pro bono work among lawyers, and developed plain language forms for self-represented litigants. As part of the Supreme Court's initiative, the Administrative Office of the Courts has increased court interpreter availability. Now, the Tennessee court system is recognized as a national leader in guaranteeing equality in the courtrooms.

The Justice Index is an online resource that relies on data and other indicators to assess a state's ability to provide access to the civil legal system regardless of the ability to afford a lawyer, speak and understand English, or navigate the legal system without an accommodation.

In the Self-Represented Index, Tennessee ranks among the top 13 states. Self-represented litigants are people who advocate on their own behalf in a case, such as evictions, mortgage foreclosures, child custody and child support proceedings, and debt collection cases. To aid the large number of Tennesseans who represent themselves before a court, the Supreme Court-appointed Access to Justice Commission partners with the Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services, the Tennessee Bar Association, and many statewide and regional legal service providers to create resources. In the nation, as many as two-thirds of the litigants represent themselves, and by 2014, Tennessee's Access to Justice Commission had developed online curriculum in high-needs areas of law. On the Justice For All website, self-represented litigants are provided with videos, local rules, guidelines for General Sessions Court, and information on how to file appeals.

Tennessee ranks near the top in terms of disability access for the judiciary's effort to reduce obstacles for individuals with emotional and cognitive challenges that make it difficult to participate in their own cases. Tennessee courts provide certified sign language interpreters free of charge, explain on the state judiciary website how to request accommodations, and require service animals be allowed.

Language access in Tennessee ranks highly in an evaluation of interpreter services and online resources for those who do not speak English as their first language. Among all 50 states, Tennessee ranks eighth with a mature program developed in 1999 using a federal grant. Today, Tennessee's Court Interpreter Program is supported by Supreme Court Rules that apply in all courts of the state and require each court to appoint an interpreter for participants with a limited ability to understand and communicate in English. The program also provides judges and court staff with information cards that explain how to work with interpreters and provides online information for those seeking interpreters, including translated documents.

One area of improvement the study noted for Tennessee is the Attorney Access Index. In Tennessee, there are only 27 civil legal aid attorneys per 10,000 people in the general population, whereas the national average is 40. New York holds the highest number in a state with 87 civil legal aid attorneys per 10,000 people.

The Justice Index is cited by judges, court administrators, leaders of the bar, legal aid leaders, social scientists, legal academics, government groups, social justice organizations, legislative and executive branch leaders, technology innovators, and others. The National Center for Access to Justice launched the Justice Index in 2014 using data collected in 2012 and 2013. At the time of its launch, the original Justice Index was the first publicly available resource of its kind. The Justice Index 2016 is now updated and expanded, and contains new data collected in 2015.

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