

Commission on Equal Access to Our Courts

December 10, 2024

10 am

Members Present

- Michelle Glodt
- Judge Northrup
- Greg Sattizahn
- Margo Tschetter Julius
- Sarah Wachal-absent
- Chairman Welk

Guests

- Lea Wroblewski
- Denise Langley
- Tom Mortland
- John Holter

Call to Order

Chairman Welk called the meeting to order at 10am. A quorum was present.

Commission Funding Status Update

Mr. Sattizahn provided a funding update. He reported that \$91,000 remained after awarding \$150,000. He projected that by the end of the fiscal year, \$150,000 would be available to award out.

The group discussed the upcoming appropriations budget hearings and the uncertainties surrounding legislative decisions. They highlighted the importance of showcasing the Justice Bus to legislators as a key initiative, suggesting a possible event in the Capitol rotunda to maximize visibility and engagement during session to include all the programs funded by CEAC. Mr. Sattizahn will work with the three legal service entities to try and schedule something for the legislative session.

Veterans Community Project Presentation: John Holter

John Holter from the Veterans Community Project presented on the organization's efforts to provide transitional housing and comprehensive services for veterans, particularly those ineligible for VA benefits. He explained their focus on helping veterans achieve financial stability, address legal issues, and access medical and dental services. The project includes tiny homes constructed with volunteer labor and equipped with wraparound services. East River Legal plays a key role in meeting veterans' legal needs, with a dedicated room in the main building ensuring confidentiality, as well as flexible office spaces for learning events and outreach. An attorney at East River Legal with a military background is active in helping those involved in the program.

Update on Previous Grant Awards

Access to Justice

Denise Langley provided an update on previous grant awards for Access to Justice. The Spanish-language guardianship and conservatorship video has been completed and is now available alongside the English version on the State Bar website. This project involved volunteer work and review by a bilingual attorney in Sioux Falls.

Ms. Langley outlined a grant request to allocate funds to the Judicare program, which forms the basis for most of their requests, and to support general operations. The current budget of \$154,000 leaves less than \$11,000 for essential program needs, including replacing outdated computers and monitors, and addressing a limited travel budget that restricts access to training opportunities. Ms. Langley emphasized the importance of using funds to cover training, which has not been available for five years. She noted that East River Legal is leading website upgrades, with work expected later this year.

Regarding staffing, Ms. Langley confirmed the recent hiring of a part-time employee in October using a CEAC grant. This hire has been instrumental in freeing up time for case-matching. The grant also includes funding for this position and related equipment through the next fiscal year and into the following summer. Of the \$30,000 grant request, \$10,000 is allocated to Judicare, and \$20,000 to general operations, with any remaining funds redirected back to Judicare.

East River Legal Services

Lea Wroblewski provided updates on technology, service demands, and funding needs. She highlighted ongoing efforts to replace outdated laptops, upgrade financial software, and manage a growing number of applications, with housing issues now surpassing family law as the most pressing area of need. Evictions and housing maintenance were noted as particularly costly and impactful, often leading to long-term homelessness.

She described new initiatives, including a street outreach paralegal to connect individuals experiencing homelessness with services, a hotline for older Americans to access legal advice, and ongoing improvements to the SD LawHelp website. Plans are in place to demonstrate the application process and available services at the legislature.

Ms. Wroblewski emphasized the need for additional operating funds to handle increased administrative demands from new grants. She explained that while grants often cover direct services, they leave operational costs unfunded. Supplemental funding is needed to address this gap and support ongoing work. Financial management involves a combination of in-house and third-party resources, with audits handled by an external firm. She also confirmed Eide Bailly was now the external auditor for both ERLS and DPLS.

Dakota Plains Legal Services

Tom Mortland provided updates on grant allocations and operational challenges. Of the \$50,000 CEAC grant awarded in July, \$37,000 was used to replace unsafe sidewalks, and remaining funds supported the Justice Bus. Operation of the bus is delayed until April. Mr. Mortland stated that the funds from previous award from the Commission in the amount of approximately \$9000 to \$10,000 were not utilized as the bus did not operate. An additional \$15,000 will be needed to fund bus operations through the year, with annual costs totaling \$25,000.

Mr. Mortland discussed the challenges with finding a suitable lease option for Pine Ridge. Relocating to Kyle is being considered, but staffing remains an issue, with an attorney position in Pierre still unfilled.

The group also discussed the recommendations from a recent Legal Services Corporation review. These included appointing a mentor or coach to provide leadership support and streamlining board committees to improve efficiency. While no strict deadlines are imposed, progress will be reported as changes are implemented, with flexibility in meeting the conditions by 2025. Mr. Mortland also reported that the annual LSC grant awards are anticipated to be received this month. The expected award to DPLS is to be reduced in the amount of approximately \$80,000 and the ERLS award is anticipated to be increased in the same amount. He also said that the Native American grant award has yet to be determined but is the largest award DPLS anticipates receiving.

Review of Grant Submissions

Mr. Sattizahn proposed \$30,000 to Access to Justice, \$15,000 to Dakota Plains Legal Services, and \$105,000 to East River Legal Services. The motion was seconded by Judge Northrup. Chairman Welk made a substitute motion to allocate \$30,000 to A2J, \$20,000 to DPLS, and \$100,000 to ERLS. Of the \$20,000 awarded to DPLS, \$15,000 is to be used with unspent funds of approximately \$10,000 to operate the Justice Bus through December 31, 2025, and the remaining funds of \$5,000 to be used for general operating expenses to be devoted to the serving of veterans. Ms. Glodt seconded the motion. The amended motion carried.

Next meeting

The group will next meet April 22 at 10 am.

Adjournment

Chairman Welk made a motion to adjourn. It was seconded by Ms. Tschetter Julius. The meeting concluded at 11:15 am.