

STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA

COMMISSION ON EQUAL ACCESS TO OUR COURTS

June 18, 2026 @ 10:00 am (CST)

ATTENDANCE:

Commissioners: Chairman Tom Welk, Michelle Glodt, Margo Tschetter Julius, Greg Sattizahn, John Holter, Hon. Julia Dvorak, and (Hon. Margo Northrup not present)

Directors Present: Denise Langley (A2J), Lea Wroblewski (ERLS), William Sulik (DPLS)

Also Present: Jeff Shultz, Board Chairman for ERLS, Makenzie Huber with South Dakota Searchlight, Craig Lafferty, Chairman of DPLS

CALL TO ORDER:

Chairman Tom Welk called the meeting to order at 10:03 am and welcomed everyone attending. After a roll call, a quorum was determined to be present.

NEW BUSINESS

Election of Officers: Chairman Welk stated that a more formal template for commission officer positions had been discussed at the previous meeting. The commission then proceeded with the election of officers for two positions: Chairman and Secretary. The terms of office are two years or until a member resigns.

Chairman Welk opened the floor for nominations. Julius nominated Welk for Chairman and Glodt for Secretary. Holter seconded the nomination. With no further discussion, a vote was held. All members voted in favor. Motion carried.

Funding Status: Greg Sattizahn reported that the commission currently has approximately \$2,700 in its bank account. He further reported that, effective July 1, the Legislature approved a \$300,000 general fund appropriation, which will be deposited into the commission's account. In addition, the Legislature annually authorizes the commission to expend up to \$200,000 in other funds, primarily generated through court surcharges. According to information provided by the Unified Judicial System (UJS) Finance Director, the commission collects an average of \$107,000 per year in surcharge revenue. These funds accumulate throughout the year as they are received. Based on projected revenues, Greg recommended awarding \$175,000 in grants at the current meeting, with the July 1 general fund appropriation supporting those awards. He suggested reserving approximately \$125,000 for distribution in December, allowing the commission to expend the full general fund appropriation prior to the next legislative session.

Traditionally, the commission makes additional grant awards at its spring meeting using the surcharge funds collected during the year. The commission's practice is to maintain a balance of approximately \$1,000 for operating expenses and distribute nearly all available funds through grant awards.

Status of Current Operations and Previous Grant Awards Update:

Access to Justice (A2J) Program Report: Denise Langley reported that A2J continues to utilize previously awarded CEAC grant funding to support a new part-time position, Judicare cases, and general operational expenses. As a result, A2J is not requesting additional funding at this time.

Langley provided the following 2025 program statistics:

- South Dakota attorneys provided more than \$150,000 in legal services on cases that were completed and closed during 2025.
- A total of 124 cases were active during 2025, including both newly opened cases and cases carried over from prior years.
- Of the 63 new cases opened in 2025, all involved priority populations, including veterans, elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, and victims of domestic violence.
- An additional 61 cases from prior years remained open and active during 2025.

Langley also provided 2026 statistics through the date of the meeting. Since January 1, A2J has opened 45 new cases and matched those clients with volunteer attorneys. Additionally, 26 cases have been completed and closed during the year to date. She noted that A2J continues to provide legal information and advice through its website, where approximately 300 inquiries have been answered. Chairman Welk asked when funding for the current parttime position would expire and require renewal. Langley responded that existing funding is expected to last approximately one to one-and-a-half years.

East River Legal Services (ERLS) Report: Lea Wroblewski reported that she will be stepping down from her position this year. She noted that discussions had taken place regarding a potential merger of the legal aid programs; however, the organizations ultimately decided to continue operating separately. An executive director search is currently underway, and Jeff Shultz will provide updates on that process. Wroblewski stated that she is focused on ensuring a smooth transition by preparing materials related to funding and staffing. She also reported that ERLS currently has two attorney vacancies.

Wroblewski emphasized that ERLS serves vulnerable populations throughout South Dakota and that 100% of its clients fall within the populations identified in the statute governing this commission's funding. She noted that CEAC funding is an important complement to the organization's other funding sources, many of which are restricted to specific purposes.

ERLS continues to expand services in western South Dakota. Beginning next year, the organization will receive new funding to provide housing-related legal services in Rapid City. Additional partnerships are also being explored to expand services through a statewide legal services grant. Wroblewski explained that funding from the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant is limited to supporting attorney and paralegal positions and does not cover many other operational expenses. As a result, flexible funding sources such as CEAC remain critical to the organization's operations.

Wroblewski suggested that the commission move away from negotiating funding requests individually and instead adopt a standardized reporting template for all applicants. She referenced a report she developed that could serve as a model for determining funding allocations. Because all three legal services programs utilize the LegalServer case management system, a standardized format could simplify reporting and provide consistent demographic and service data. She also noted that the commission funds South Dakota Law Help, which is utilized by all three programs, although each organization uses the platform differently for intake purposes. Wroblewski observed that there is sometimes confusion regarding terminology, particularly with respect to concepts such as centralized intake systems, as each program conducts intake differently. She explained that the proposed reporting format is designed to track overall funding outcomes and organizational performance. In addition, she suggested that annual audit reports could provide useful information for the commission. Wroblewski noted that CEAC funding is a distinct funding source that is reviewed and tracked annually through the organizations' audit process.

Executive Director Search Update: Chairman Welk asked Jeff Shultz to provide an update on the search for ERLS's next Executive Director. Mr. Shultz reported that the position has been posted and the recruitment process is underway. He noted that Lea Wroblewski plans to leave at the end of August and expressed hope that, depending on the applicant pool and hiring timeline, a successor can be hired and in place before her departure.

Chairman Welk also inquired about the two vacant positions currently within the organization. Wroblewski stated that she is optimistic that a staff attorney may return to the organization, which would leave only the Managing Attorney position vacant. She indicated that she would prefer to allow the new Executive Director time to transition into the role and then make the decision regarding the selection of the Managing Attorney.

Dakota Plains Legal Services (DPLS) Report: William Sulik began by expressing his appreciation for Lea Wroblewski, noting that it has been a pleasure working with her and thanking her for her immeasurable assistance, leadership, and influence over the years.

Mr. Sulik reported that DPLS remains fully engaged in providing civil legal services to low-income individuals, elderly persons, veterans, individuals with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, and Indigenous communities throughout South Dakota. He stated that the need for legal services continues to grow, with DPLS experiencing a 20% increase in applications for assistance in 2025. During 2025, DPLS provided legal assistance to 1,330 households, with significant efforts focused on family stability, housing, and access to basic resources. Mr. Sulik noted that DPLS continues to utilize previously awarded CEAC grant funds to serve client populations identified in statute. He emphasized that CEAC funding is critical to the organization's ability to provide services.

DPLS is requesting that the commission lift restrictions on previously awarded funds designated for centralized intake services. In light of current budget reductions, the organization would like the flexibility to redirect those funds toward direct casework and client services.

Mr. Sulik reported that DPLS continues to prioritize support for the Justice Bus, which remains an important outreach tool for serving rural and underserved communities. During the past year, the organization adjusted its outreach strategy to focus more heavily on local communities, including Fort Pierre, Winner, and Pine Ridge. Through these visits, staff distributed informational materials, made community connections, and increased awareness of available legal services.

He further reported that DPLS is facing a significant reduction in anticipated funding from other sources and is taking a cautious approach to filling vacant positions in order to preserve services. Despite these financial pressures, DPLS remains stable, continues to improve outreach efforts, and is preparing for an upcoming leadership transition. Mr. Sulik stated that DPLS will continue collaborating closely with East River Legal Services and Access to Justice to meet the growing demand for civil legal aid.

Chairman Welk requested clarification regarding the restricted CEAC funds. Mr. Sulik explained that prior to his arrival, \$54,000 had been awarded for the development of a centralized intake system. However, implementation of that project was postponed so that the funds could potentially be used to address other organizational needs.

Discussion of the Justice Bus: Commission members discussed the effectiveness of the Justice Bus and whether it is meeting its intended goals. Mr. Sulik acknowledged that the program may not have fully achieved all of its original expectations, but stated that it continues to provide meaningful access to legal services in remote communities where assistance is otherwise difficult to obtain. He noted that staffing remains the greatest challenge. DPLS no longer has a dedicated Pierre-based attorney to operate the bus and instead relies on staff from multiple offices to provide services during outreach events.

Chairman Lafferty commented that he views the Justice Bus as a significant asset, despite the staffing challenges. He emphasized the substantial legal needs of residents on the Pine Ridge and Cheyenne River Sioux Reservations and highlighted the importance of the bus's participation in events such as the Veterans Powwow on Pine Ridge. He encouraged DPLS to continue ensuring that the bus serves all tribal communities whenever possible.

Chairman Welk suggested contacting Dean Neil Fulton at the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law to explore whether law students could assist with Justice Bus operations and outreach efforts. Margo Julius agreed that law students could be a valuable resource, particularly for assisting with intake processes in situations where attorney involvement is not immediately necessary. She suggested that students could help connect individuals with services, conduct outreach, and assess community needs. Mr. Sulik responded that DPLS is already utilizing a similar approach. Because there is no longer a dedicated attorney assigned to the Justice Bus, staff members from offices serving tribal communities are routinely assigned to assist with outreach events and service delivery.

Chairman Welk added that, during his years representing a telecommunications company, he observed that public utilities often have foundations which provide grants for community needs. He suggested that utility providers may represent a potential funding source for technology and connectivity improvements that could enhance outreach efforts and access to legal services in underserved areas.

Michelle Glodt reiterated her support for involving law students in Justice Bus outreach efforts. She also inquired about how outreach locations are selected and whether the current stops—including Fort Pierre, Winner, and Mobridge—represent the most effective use of the program's limited resources. Glodt also asked whether Pierre remains the most strategic location for storing the Justice Bus. She suggested that housing the bus closer to reservation communities might allow it to be deployed more frequently and efficiently. Sulik responded that the organization is actively exploring that question.

Chairman Lafferty responded that he would like to see the Justice Bus expand its presence in more rural and underserved communities, such as Parmalee, Wanblee, and other areas where significant unmet legal needs exist.

John Holter asked about the original purpose and expectations for the Justice Bus when the program was first established. Chairman Welk responded that the commission does not intend to micromanage the operation of the program. While there were expectations associated with the Justice Bus when funding was provided, decisions regarding its management and deployment are the responsibility of DPLS and its leadership. Welk stated that the commission's role is primarily as a funding source and that it trusts DPLS to exercise its judgment in determining how best to utilize the resource.

Discussion of Standardized Reporting Format: Chairman Welk returned to Lea Wroblewski's earlier suggestion regarding standardized reporting and asked for additional input on the proposed format and information to be included. Welk stated that he found the report format to be user-friendly and believed it would be beneficial for both Greg Sattizahn and the Legislature when reviewing funding requests and program outcomes. He asked whether the legal services organizations could work together to develop a common reporting form before Wroblewski's departure and whether the commission should consider changing its current reporting approach.

Lea Wroblewski responded that legal services organizations have a meeting scheduled in July and plan to discuss the proposal at that time. She added that they intend to involve Sharon Chantos in the process and work collaboratively to develop a standardized reporting format. Wroblewski noted that the goal is to establish clear expectations and provide guidance for future leadership and staff who will be responsible for preparing reports for the commission.

Grant Awards: Chairman Welk noted that both East River Legal Services (ERLS) and Dakota Plains Legal Services (DPLS) had requested grant funding of \$87,500 each, an equal division of the available funds. Access to Justice

(A2J) declined to request grant funding. After asking whether there were any additional questions, Chairman Welk called for a motion regarding the grant awards.

Michelle Glodt moved to award \$87,500 to ERLS and \$87,500 to DPLS, for a total grant allocation of \$175,000. The motion was seconded by Margo Julius.

Chairman Welk called for further discussion. Hearing none, a vote was taken. All members voted in favor, with none opposed. Motion carried.

Chairman Welk stated that, following approval of the meeting minutes, it would take approximately two weeks for the grant checks to be processed and issued.

Further Discussion of Restricted Grant Funds: Margo Julius asked for clarification regarding DPLS's request to repurpose previously awarded funds and whether the request represented a shift away from funding the Justice Bus. Mr. Sulik explained that DPLS is requesting permission to use the \$54,000 previously awarded funds, originally restricted for the development of a centralized intake system, for general program support instead.

Denise Langley clarified that the centralized intake grant was intended to support DPLS's internal intake process and was separate from the statewide legal services website. Lea Wroblewski added that the proposal was presented to the commission shortly after Mr. Sulik joined DPLS and that the funds were classified by auditors as restricted. Mr. Sulik stated that DPLS does not currently operate a centralized intake system and, given potential staffing reductions, would prefer to use the restricted funds to support ongoing legal services and operations.

Chairman Welk suggested that DPLS and its board further evaluate the request and provide additional information, including projected total costs on the DPLS centralized intake system. He noted that the commission could hold a special meeting to consider the request rather than waiting until the December meeting. Mr. Sulik agreed with that approach.

Next Meeting Date and Adjournment

Chairman Welk proposed **December 8 at 10:00 a.m.** as the date and time for the next commission meeting. The proposed date and time were accepted by consensus.

Chairman Welk then entertained a motion to adjourn. John Holter moved to adjourn, and Michelle Glodt seconded the motion. Upon a vote, all members present voted in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 11:12 a.m.

**** The Minutes were approved by the Commission via electronic communication on _____**

Michelle Glodt
Secretary, CEAC

Date