

## **Supreme Court forum series aims to eliminate barriers to justice system for low-income Montanans**

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**Contact:** Patty Fain  
406-794-7824

HELENA – The Montana Supreme Court’s Access to Justice Commission will be hosting a statewide Access to Justice Forum Series in an effort to assess the state of access to the civil justice system in Montana and to explore additional ways to eliminate barriers for Montanans in need.

The first forum will be held in Kalispell on **Wednesday, October 21, 2015, from 4 to 6 p.m. in Room 139 of the Arts & Technology Building at Flathead Valley Community College.**

A Listening Panel with Supreme Court Justice James Jeremiah Shea, District Court Judge Heidi Ulbricht, Justice of the Peace Dan Wilson, Past State Bar of Montana Presidents Don Murray and Randy Snyder, 11th Judicial District Court Clerk Peg Allison, and other community and government leaders will be at the Kalispell forum. The panel will hear from community organizations who serve Montanans needing assistance with legal issues and from people who have encountered barriers in gaining access to our legal system. The panel will discuss how to make better use of legal services that are currently available. Montanans are asked to participate in order to help the Commission better understand the challenges still facing Montana’s court system and to find practical solutions.

Montana Supreme Court Justice Beth Baker, who chairs the Access to Justice Commission, points out that the statewide Court Help Program has provided information and legal forms to thousands of Montanans since it was created in 2009 to enable them to address their issues in the court system and to improve the efficiency of the courts for all court users. Still, she said, when individuals

need legal advice or assistance, many have nowhere to go. Research shows that unmet legal needs affect especially vulnerable populations: victims of domestic violence, people affected by mental illness or physical disability, Native Americans, persons with limited English proficiency, the elderly, and veterans.

Organizations that help low-and moderate-income people in need of legal services do not have the resources to meet the demand for their services. In 2014, fewer than one in ten Montanans in need of civil legal aid received help. The legal problems of low-income Montanans most often involve essential human needs like food, shelter and health care. Baker said that the Commission aims to increase the availability and types of legal assistance available to these populations, to expand legal services in rural areas, and to foster collaboration between legal providers.

“People come to court for help with the most important issues in their lives,” Justice Shea added. “Narrowing Montana’s substantial justice gap will help ensure justice for all, regardless of income level, location, or status.” Shea encouraged community leaders and residents to join him in attending the forum to “work toward a better future for all of Montana.”

The forums will be held in seven locations across Montana over the next year. The Commission will use the information to present recommendations to the 2017 Legislature.