

BY LUZ M. MOLINA AND
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ACCESSIBILITY & LEGAL SERVICES FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES COMMITTEES: MISSIONS AND HISTORY

FOCUS ON ACCESSIBILITY TO LEGAL SERVICES



Many Louisiana residents do not yet have full access to the legal system by virtue of deafness, hearing difficulties, physical and mental disabilities, and limited language proficiency. This special issue of the *Louisiana Bar Journal* seeks to highlight the ongoing work of the Louisiana State Bar Association's (LSBA) Legal Services for Persons with Disabilities Committee and the Louisiana Access to Justice Commission's Accessibility Committee in ensuring that individuals who face those barriers are able to fully participate in and seek redress through the legal system. This work is critical in ensuring that all individuals in our state are able to seek legal protection in those instances where the rights granted to all individuals by the Louisiana Constitution of 1974, Article 1, and all other laws, are in jeopardy.

The Accessibility Committee, formerly known as the Language Access Committee, has been active since 2015 when the Access to Justice Commission was established. The mission of the Accessibility Committee, as reconstituted,¹ is to support issues of language access, disability, and other tangential and collateral areas through research and the development of empirical evidence which informs further initiatives related to the critical need for impartiality in Louisiana's justice system.

The collective effort of the Accessibility Committee and the Legal Services for Persons with Disabilities Committee has steadfastly focused on educating the

profession — both bench and bar — on various aspects of accessibility which require particular and special measures to ensure access for those who face barriers.

The Legal Services for Persons with Disabilities Committee was established by Judge Jay C. Zainey, U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Louisiana, during his 1995-96 tenure as LSBA president. Since then, the committee has sponsored training programs to support attorneys within the practice area of disability law, law students interested in disability advocacy, and all practitioners in understanding how disability plays a role in client relationships. In short, its mission has been to provide members of the bar and the general public with a greater understanding and knowledge of the legal needs and rights of persons with disabilities, to better meet the legal needs of persons with disabilities, and to increase the knowledge that persons with disabilities have regarding their rights and resources. In this regard, the committee initiated a Disabilities Assistance Network (DAN). DAN provides a listing of attorneys who have indicated they have experience in, or are willing to assist with, one or more disability law issues. The network is organized by parish to make information and possible resources available to the public and other practitioners handling disability rights cases² easily accessible. For more information, go online: www.lsba.org/Members/DANsearch.aspx.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Language Access Committee supported the efforts of the Louisiana Supreme Court's Office of Language Access and the implementation of the statewide Language Access Plan. The goal of the committee was to expand efforts to ensure litigants in Louisiana's court are not denied due process because of an inability to communicate with court personnel. Of note, the committee developed a Bench Card and Attorneys' Reference Guide for engaging interpreters and an interpreter services brochure for members of the public who need to request interpreter services from the court. The committee also provided research for identified revisions of court rules and state law regarding interpreter qualifications to comply with the Language Access Plan.

2. A listing does not constitute a recommendation or endorsement by the Louisiana State Bar Association.

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BY JUDGE LAURIE R. BRISTER



COMMENTARY: A WORD ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY BEYOND DISABILITY AND LANGUAGE

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