

**Access to Justice Rollout Remarks**  
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It has been an exciting and fast paced year for the Access to Justice Commission and its Advisory Committees. Everyone has proceeded with a sense of urgency. This has been a phenomenal effort by so many. The Commission thanks all of you for your time, point of view and can do spirit.

I'd like to give a context in which the Access to Justice Commission began. Shortly after we were appointed in April 2009, I attended a national Access to Justice meeting. I learned that as the 25<sup>th</sup> state to have an ATJ Commission, Tennessee was the only state to have the entire Court wholly behind this effort. National leaders were imploring ATJ Commissions to get at least one member of the Court involved. Not only was the entire Court committed, the Court had declared Access to Justice its #1 strategic priority!

In doing so, the Court hired through the Administrative Office of the Courts, the very able and energetic Access to Justice Coordinator, Rebecca Rhodes, a lawyer who has been the heart and soul of our Commission without whom we could have not made it this far. To the best of our knowledge, no other state has committed a staff position solely to promote such an access to justice initiative.

Pursuant to its Rulemaking authority, the Court gave the Commission a rather herculean task. We were charged to develop an initial strategic plan within one year and to follow up with these initiatives and produce a second plan two years from now.

The Court appointed Commissioners who said "We can do this". There are a multitude of reasons why the Commissioners had such confidence. Most importantly, we knew we had the entire Court's support. The Court has been like a troubadour sounding the trumpet on this initiative, and it has made all the difference.

We also stepped into a community which had been working on this effort for years – groups that have been nationally recognized for their efforts, such as:

- our **equal justice community** which has shouldered the load for the state's access to justice efforts;

- the **Tennessee Alliance of Legal Services**, the coordinating arm of the equal justice community;
- the **Tennessee Bar Association** which continues to raise the bar for lawyers to be always cognizant of their crucial role in society to help others;
- the **Tennessee Bar Foundation**, which has funded many access to justice programs, principally through the interest bearing escrow accounts of lawyers;
- the **Administrative Office of the Courts**, which so ably administers our statewide court system;
- and judges, legislators, clerks, librarians, ministers and other community leaders.

All of these groups were energized by the Tennessee Supreme Court's initiatives and the possibilities as a result. They also said "We can do this".

After many meetings and considering the recommendations of the Advisory Committees, each chaired by a Commissioner, the Commission met and developed its strategic plan and four goals, which the Chief Justice will announce shortly. The Commission remained focused that it is the Court's Commission and that its proposals needed to be within the Court's authority. Therefore, in its plan, the Commission listed each goal and suggested Court actions.

The Commission also outlined its own steps towards these goals during the next two years. We will continue our efforts through our committees to address the pro bono activities of lawyers, self represented litigants and forms, educational outreach and language and disability barriers. We will also focus on resources, technology and faith based communities to look at increasing our limited resources, increasing our use of technology and developing an affiliation with the faith communities to bring about access to justice.

The Commission is committed to looking at where people go when they are in need, such as the clerk's office, libraries and the clergy and develop ways to make sure these communities know how to help. Even with limited resources, we are aware that the lawyers themselves are resources, and we are committed to finding ways to involve lawyers in cases which they do not typically take, whether it is a particular area of the law or an area where there are not enough lawyers to serve the need, such as in rural areas.

We know pro bono is not free, however, and we will take a look at the resources and technology to get the cases to the lawyers. And of course, we are committed to make sure that our current equal justice community and bar associations become even stronger and help lead the way.

A couple of months ago, celebrated civil rights leader, Dr. Dorothy Height passed away at the age of 98. Her tireless and impressive work on humanitarian issues spanned almost a century. As the only woman leader among the civil rights leadership known as the Big Six Leadership, she is known for playing a critical role in helping her colleagues put aside their fractional differences and forge a united front.

In a soon-to-be published book, *Living with Purpose*, Dr. Height left the following advice to meet today's challenges:

To move forward, we have to look at the world as it is becoming rather than how it has been. We have to see how we have to stretch ourselves to become related to this ever-changing scenery. We have to gain a recognition not only that no one stands alone, but on the positive side, that we also need each other...In the long run, it is how we relate to each other and how well we work together that will make the deciding difference."

During the past year, the way we have worked together has made the deciding difference. We will strive to continue to work together, recognize that we need each other, look at the world as it is becoming and stretch ourselves to become related to the ever-changing scenery.

If we do that, we can do this.