ILLINOIS STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

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Law-Related Education

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Committee on Law-Related Education

Representing Yourself in Court: Illinois Free Legal Answers and Other Resources

BY SAFFRON MEARS & ANDREA SCHRADER

THE PROCESS OF GOING TO COURT can be difficult to navigate even with the assistance of an attorney. This difficulty is only further amplified when navigating court proceedings for the first time without any legal assistance. Unfortunately, this is the reality for many self-represented litigants in the court system. In a 2022 Justice Gap report from the Legal Services Corporation, it was reported that low-income Americans do not get any or enough legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems.[1] Among this demographic, one in two individuals (53%) do not know if they could find and afford a lawyer if they needed one.[2] This demographic is often referred to as self-represented litigants or *pro se* litigants, which means individuals representing themselves in court without the assistance of a licensed attorney.

For some self-represented litigants, the event of going to court may be just one small part of a list of daily challenges. Financial hardships, housing issues, food insecurity, and lack of reliable transportation are only some of the obstacles that an individual may experience outside the courtroom. These

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Congratulations to 2025-26 Law-Related Education Committee Chair Rocky Martinez on a successful bar year leading LRE! Current Chair Brittany Shaw and Vice Chair Hon. Rex Gradeless, II presented Rocky with a commemorative plaque during the Annual Meeting on June 12, 2026, in St. Louis.

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challenges can affect the likelihood of self-represented litigants pursuing further legal action. In addition, the self-help resources that are available to self-represented litigants may be difficult to access or understand without proper guidance. These obstacles can put self-represented litigants at an immediate disadvantage compared to those with legal representation in the courtroom.

However, there are self-help resources available with the mission of creating accessible and easy-to-understand tools for those navigating the legal space on their own. One of the most effective services for self-represented individuals is Illinois Free Legal Answers. Illinois Free Legal Answers (IFLA) is a virtual legal aid clinic that allows qualifying users to post civil legal questions at no cost. These questions are then answered by volunteer attorneys. It is important to note that a pending court case is not required to use this service—individuals may use the program to receive general civil legal advice, gain guidance on whether to pursue future legal action or not, or obtain advice on how to prepare for future court proceedings. The site hosts volunteer licensed attorneys who answer hundreds of questions per month on legal issues covering housing, family law, consumer rights, employment, and much more.

With AI-generated legal advice on the rise, IFLA works hard to connect individuals with real volunteer attorneys who are trained to assist self-represented litigants and provide clients with next steps that are personalized to their unique situations. In comparison, AI-generated legal advice is ineffective and can be incorrect, too generalized, or even completely fabricated. While using IFLA may not "solve" every legal issue, it provides self-represented litigants with the necessary tools to be better prepared and knowledgeable for the next steps in their cases.

IFLA prides itself on creating a system that is user-friendly and easy to navigate for clients.

Creating a user account is simple and necessary to be able to post questions (and can be done here). First, users must agree to the terms of the User Agreement. These terms address what the site offers, information about the volunteer lawyers, and rules they must follow. Next, users must input some new client information to create and then activate their account.



Law-Related Education Committee Members for 2026-27

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OFFICE
ILLINOIS BAR CENTER
424 S. SECOND STREET
SPRINGFIELD, IL 62701
PHONES: 217-525-1760 OR 800-252-8908
WWW.ISBA.ORG

EDITOR
Nathaniel Bruce Davidson

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER
Celeste Niemann
cniemann@isba.org

ART DIRECTOR
Ticara Turley
tturley@isba.org

PUBLICATIONS ATTORNEY
Kelsey Burge
kburge@isba.org

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Articles are prepared as an educational service to members of ISBA. They should not be relied upon as a substitute for individual legal research.

The articles in this newsletter are not intended to be used and may not be relied on for penalty avoidance.

AI Policy: If authors have used artificial intelligence (AI) in the preparation of their articles, they have acknowledged that they accept responsibility for all final work product and have verified the accuracy of all content, including content produced with the assistance of AI.

Here are some of the general eligibility requirements to ask a question using IFLA:

1. You must be 18 years old or older.
2. You must meet financial eligibility requirements.
3. You cannot currently be in jail or prison.
4. Your question must be a civil legal question. Questions cannot be criminal—this includes advice related to traffic violations. *However, questions related to the sealing and expungement, or the hiding or destroying of criminal records from public view, are allowed.*

Once an account is created, users can submit up to three questions every year. Users can type their questions and also have the option of attaching documents or photographs. This can be particularly helpful when there is a court case pending, or the user has received some type of legal correspondence. When a question is submitted, volunteer attorneys are able to respond to the questions of their choice and provide advice anonymously. Clients will receive an email notification if an attorney has replied to their question and will have up to 10 days to respond if the volunteer left the question open. This allows the volunteer and the user to have an ongoing conversation to get additional information, clarify advice given, and ensure all questions are answered. After 10 days have passed since the last communication, the question will automatically close if the volunteer has not closed it prior.

There are several other advantages to using IFLA beyond its superiority to AI. One such advantage is that users may be able to connect with an attorney anywhere in the state. This is especially helpful for users who do not qualify for traditional legal aid or who live in legal deserts, which are areas with very few private attorneys. Another advantage is the site can be accessed by both users and volunteers at any time. A user can post a question at their convenience, even if they have work or other obstacles that prevent them from connecting with attorneys during traditional office hours. Yet another important advantage is that this service is completely free to users!

In addition, IFLA is a great starting point to learn about additional self-help resources for a specific legal problem. Volunteer attorneys often connect self-represented litigants who use IFLA with other helpful resources, such as Illinois Legal Aid Online, which provides individuals with helpful articles explaining various legal concepts and terminology as well as "Easy Forms," or step-by-step guided tutorials to fill out over 70 different court forms and other documents. This site can be accessed by anyone needing legal



assistance and is specifically designed for those who cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

Another self-help resource available is Illinois Court Help, which connects self-represented individuals with court guides to help better understand the court process. Users can access information by calling, texting, or using the virtual court guide. The site also has links to approved statewide forms as well as links to information on e-filing, appealing a court decision, and appearing in court remotely. This free service can also connect individuals with other local legal aid organizations and free resources. These are only a few examples of the many resources available to help self-represented litigants feel more prepared and knowledgeable about future court proceedings.

The Illinois legal community includes many volunteer attorneys who are eager to help self-represented clients on their journey through the court system. Whether for an upcoming hearing or general legal advice, Illinois Free Legal Answers is a great place to start preparing for your next steps. ■

Saffron Mears is a second-year law student at the University of Wisconsin School of Law.

Andrea Schrader is an Attorney Program Manager for the Public Interest Law Initiative.

1. Legal Services Corporation, "Executive Summary," *Justice Gap*, Legal Services Corporation, https://justicegap.lsc.gov/resource/executive-summary/ (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).
2. *Id.*

Review of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Public Schools

BY MADONNA T. LECHNER

ON FEBRUARY 14, 2025, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, issued a Dear Colleague letter to federally funded schools, colleges, and universities. The letter directed those entities to discontinue efforts to achieve racial diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The Department held that such efforts fail to satisfy the strict scrutiny standard set by the Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023). The Department asserted that DEI initiatives are not narrowly tailored to remediate specific, identified instances of racial discrimination. As such, in the Department's view, DEI initiatives do not meet a compelling interest.

According to the U.S. Attorney General's Office, the Dear Colleague letter articulates existing law preventing educational institutions from classifying students according to race. The Attorney General maintains that the U.S. government does not claim DEI in itself is illegal; rather, it claims that educational institutions that are breaking federal law by classifying students by race should not use the concept of DEI as an excuse to do so. According to the Attorney General, the Dear Colleague letter addresses how educational institutions treat students, not what they teach.

Consistent with the Department's directive, the State of New Hampshire, on July 1, 2025, enacted a law to prohibit DEI initiatives in its publicly funded schools and postsecondary institutions. Supporters of the law asserted that it was designed to prevent giving anyone a preference for the purpose of achieving demographic outcomes, rather than treating individuals equally. The law would impose steep financial penalties on educational institutions which fail to comply after October 1, 2025.

On August 7, 2025, the National Education Association (NEA), four local school districts in New Hampshire, and three local teachers, filed a complaint with the U.S. District Court for the District of New Hampshire, Case No.: 25-CV-293. The plaintiffs sought declaratory and injunctive relief from the State.

The plaintiffs argued that the New Hampshire law is vague and unconstitutional, and would prevent responsible entities from providing an inclusive education. For example, the plaintiffs claimed that the law could prevent educators from providing essential services, programs, and training to students. They stated that the determination of whether a program is DEI is not clear-cut. Consequently, educators could shun certain programs altogether to avoid facing financial penalties from the State. Moreover, the plaintiffs asserted that the law violated the First Amendment rights of educators and students. The plaintiffs argued that the law was not just designed to address quotas, but to suppress ideas. The NEA averred that every New Hampshire student deserves a high-quality public education in a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment. The NEA continued that programs and initiatives, including classroom instruction, that recognize the importance of DEI are not only essential to fostering a sense of belonging for all students, they are also legally required in many cases.

On September 4, 2025, the District Court issued a temporary restraining order enjoining enforcement of the New Hampshire law until September 18, 2025. On October 2, 2025, the District Court issued a preliminary injunction to last while the case proceeds. The court found that the law was likely unconstitutional due to its startling breadth and vagueness.

The case remains active and is proceeding in the U.S. District Court for the District of New Hampshire. The court is considering whether to make its block permanent. The plaintiffs' reply briefs were due October 1, 2026. The plaintiffs are requesting a final ruling. ■

Madonna T. Lechner is a Former Investigator and Team Leader, for the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Chicago.



Justice Elizabeth Rochford



Justice Jesse Reyes



Joseph Lehman

THE COMMITTEE ON LAW-RELATED EDUCATION established the ISBA Civics Education Award to annually honor up to three individuals who promote public understanding of civics, particularly our legal system. Congratulations to the 2026 recipients—Justice Elizabeth Rochford, Justice Jesse Reyes, and Joseph Lehman—recognized at the ISBA Member Appreciation & Recognition Reception on May 14, 2026, at The Morton Arboretum in Lisle.

ISBA Group
HEALTH INSURANCE

We Need YOUR Help!

After a successful response to our initial member survey, the ISBA is moving on to the next phase of our project to explore the development of a group health insurance offering for members' law firms. While the project is progressing, we remain in the early stages with much work yet to be done, and we need your help.

Specifically, we need as many members as possible to fill out our ISBA Group Health Insurance Quote Form and securely submit it to KeyRisk Underwriters (the firm the ISBA has contracted with to assist with this project). The form collects basic information about your firm's employees and their dependents that are covered by the firm's current health insurance offering. Once we have collected as many forms as possible, KeyRisk Underwriters and the ISBA will use the aggregate data to begin discussions with health insurance carriers about coverage plans for ISBA members' firms.

How to Help in This Effort:

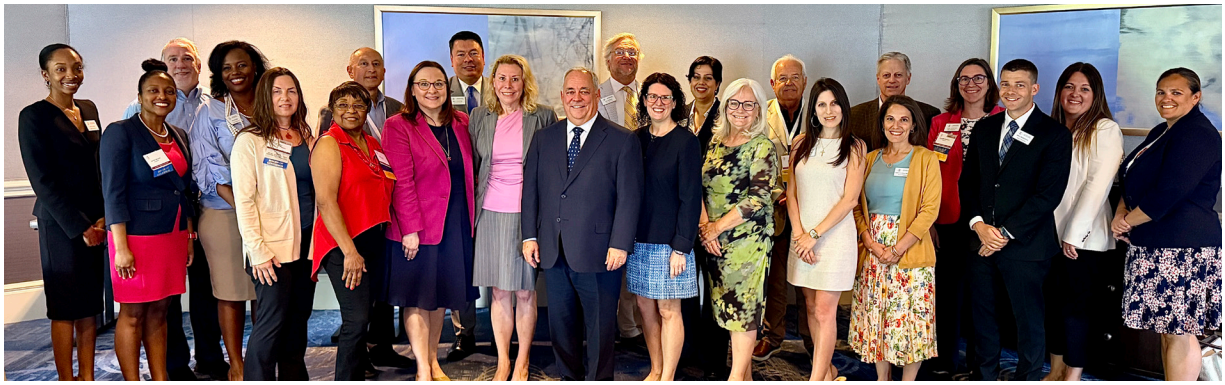
- Scan the QR code below or visit isba.org/group-health-ins to view our ISBA Group Health Insurance webpage.
- Download our ISBA Group Health Insurance Quote Form.
- Deliver the digital form to the staff member at your firm who is responsible for health insurance and/or human resources.
- Once the form is complete, upload it to KeyRisk Underwriters' secure document portal by using the link provided on the webpage and the form. **Do not send this form to the ISBA!**

isba.org/group-health-ins

2026 Annual Meeting

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