

**Director Rachel Rossi**  
**Director of Office for Access to Justice, U.S. Department of Justice**  
**Civil Justice Council National Forum 2024**

**Introduction**

1. Thank you for the generous introduction, Lady Chief Justice Carr. It's an honor to share this podium with you today. Thank you for your leadership and for elevating the role and voice of the judiciary in the pursuit of access to justice.
2. And thank you to the Master of the Rolls, Sir Geoffrey Vos for the invitation to speak, as well as your commitment to advancing access to justice. It was an honor to meet you when you visited the U.S. Department of Justice in 2022, and to continue our shared learning and collaboration as our team visited London this week. Your passion and energy for this work is inspiring and contagious.
3. You, Sam and the CJC staff have been incredibly generous to host us here in London, and to organize a day of meetings and site visits yesterday. And we are also grateful for our colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, access to justice leaders, members of the legal profession, judges, academics, researchers and other advocates who generously hosted us. This week, our Office has learned about access to justice challenges and innovative reforms here in the U.K, and we look forward to building on the connections we've made, and to strengthen our collaboration going forward.
4. Much appreciation as well to the Civil Justice Council, for your important work, and for the privilege of joining you today.
5. It's hard to believe that the last time I was in London was over 15 years ago! As a law student, I studied here for a semester in South Kensington—an educational and formative experience during the earliest days of my legal career.
6. I remember fondly the tube rides from our flat, where we had far too many students all sharing rooms together, in Ealing Broadway;
7. I remember clerking for a solicitor who specialized in criminal defense and international law and shadowing barristers in court;
8. And was even fortunate enough to participate in a moot court competition at Grays Inn against student members. I won't tell whether the U.S. or England won that day!
9. I'm particularly honored to be back in London as the first from outside the UK to deliver remarks as a keynote speaker at the Civil Justice Council National Forum and to engage in so many engaging meetings this week.
10. This opportunity for collaboration aligns well with this year's theme - Access to Justice: Working Together.
11. So this afternoon I want to center on this theme, and highlight three reasons to prioritize working together in this way. **First**, when we work together, we see that our challenges are more similar than they are different. **Second**, in working together we can improve our strategies to address these challenges by sharing practices, learning new approaches, and replicating innovative programs. But **third**, and most importantly of all, when we work together, we reinforce our commitment to our shared mission and renew our belief that equal justice for all *can* be achieved.

## **The Problem – Shared Access to Justice Challenges**

12. First, we face similar problems in seeking equal justice. While it sounds easy, maintaining our belief that access to justice for all can be achieved is difficult when the justice gap is so wide, and when many of us have engaged in this fight for decades.
13. We've heard about broad concerns about these access to justice barriers being encountered here in the UK, as we've engaged in a number of meetings this week. A recent study by the Legal Services Board and the Law Society revealed that in the last 4 years in England and Wales only 62% of those with legal need received legal help.
14. And the problems we face in the United States are frequently even more dire. A recent study by the Legal Services Corporation found that in 2022, low-income Americans did not receive any or enough legal help for 92% of their civil legal problems.
15. Even more troubling, in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Survey, when it comes to affordability and accessibility of civil justice among the wealthier countries, the UK ranks third to last. The United States, unfortunately, ranks last.
16. And we know this civil justice gap means more than a bad day in court. It means that certain communities are disproportionately experiencing loss of housing, healthcare, employment, access to custody of children, or even the inability to seek safety through legal interventions.
17. And civil justice issues can cluster, compound, and exacerbate each other, not only causing overwhelming harm to individuals, but as the Minister of State noted, this can restrict economic progress, and diminish trust in the rule of law. This is particularly troubling given that access to justice gaps are most often experienced by low-income communities and communities of color.
18. Yet it renews my enthusiasm to see how in the face of these justice gaps, there is incredible innovation being led, both here in the UK and in the US.

## **UK Innovations**

19. The second reason that working together should be prioritized, is to encourage shared learning and innovative practices. For example, as we've held meetings, listening sessions, and site visits this week, we've learned of the various efforts of the Online Procedure Rule Committee and their vital work, including "pre-action portals" that offer a first opportunity to share information and potentially settle legal issues without going to court.
20. We learned about innovative legal advice and support systems, providing online and in-person assistance through a people-centered approach.
21. We learned about people-centered data and research to improve access to justice in the UK and beyond.
22. And we learned about your leadership on transformation efforts through digitization, technology, improved processes and user-centered approaches. And much more.
23. The creativity and commitment of access to justice leaders across England and Wales, and of those in this room, is inspirational.

## Office for Access to Justice

24. Our Office is also taking steps to launch new initiatives and programs to expand access to justice in the United States.
25. As you may know, the Office for Access to Justice is a standalone office within the U.S. Department of Justice, which has now grown to over 45 dedicated and passionate professional staff.
26. Our mission is to break down barriers to the promises and protections of our legal systems for all communities. The starting point for our efforts is our belief that justice belongs to everyone. The Lady Chief Justice said it best - if access to it depends on income, identity, where you live, or what language you speak—we cannot call it justice. And the persistent disparities we see across our legal systems simply cannot be accepted or minimized.
27. Our Office—its existence—by itself is an important innovation. We are a permanent fixture as a change agent within the U.S. Department of Justice and the federal government, strategically leveraging the resources and tools of DOJ and all federal agencies in the executive branch to expand access to justice nationally.

## ATJ Work

28. One priority for our office has been increasing access to legal aid and legal support.
  - As one example, our Office leads the *Federal Government Pro Bono Program*. For any federal government employee, within the Justice Department or any federal agency, our Program vets pro bono opportunities for conflicts of interest, connects attorneys with pre-screened opportunities, and provides support, training and mentoring.
  - We have tripled the staff of the pro bono program and launched a new online portal that connects attorneys across the United States to pre-vetted pro bono opportunities with the click of a mouse.
  - We see this program as an essential element to closing the justice gap, because it can mobilize our federal workforce of almost 3 million employees to pitch in and provide legal help.
29. Another critical focus for our Office has been prioritizing people-centered approaches to justice.
  - This includes expanding language access to better serve communities who do not speak or write English. We house the Justice Department's first-ever *Language Access Coordinator*, who has a mandate to expand language access resources and support across the Justice Department's many offices. In her first year, she led the update and modernization of the department's Language Access Plan for the first time in over a decade.
  - Our Language Access Coordinator also launched a *translation initiative* to help translate Department materials into other languages. To date, we've worked with over 60 DOJ offices to translate content into over 50 languages. This includes translations of know-your-rights pamphlets, victim-rights materials,

press releases, online webpages, forms, outreach materials, our initiative that combats hate crimes, and so much more.

- Another exciting example is our exciting and brand-new initiative launched just this summer, Access DOJ. The goal of this program is to institutionalize our people-centered approach to make the Department's services more accessible, effective, and efficient through user design or customer experience best practices.
  - Human- or "user"-centered design offers us flexible ways to center the experience of the people who need or use justice services to identify opportunities to improve them. Without that structure, our norm has been for government, and the legal system, to do the best we can based on *our* experience. But if we do not hear from our end users, we will inevitably miss opportunities to improve our services in ways that are most impactful.
  - Some of Access DOJ's projects include engaging with users and the public to: simplify the form used to apply for reinstatement of rights after a criminal conviction; to better expand access to online federal bankruptcy proceedings; and to improve the ability for the public to report crime and other violations of the law through Justice Department online reporting portals.
  - While this is a new and exciting focus to expand access the Department of Justice in the US, the UK has been a leader in this area for many years. You have hundreds of experts in design, user research, and service delivery across your government agencies.
  - Yesterday, we were thrilled to visit with leaders from the Ministry of Justice, Government Digital Service and Policy Lab to learn from designers and researchers on their work to create prototypes and conduct usability tests.
  - We were similarly excited to see the journey maps informed by rigorous user research developed by the policy, digital justice and service transformation experts in your Ministry of Justice. We hope to create similar ways to help government agencies design effective and efficient interventions based on a deep understanding of people's journeys and pain points.
30. Our Office is also prioritizing broad partnerships across government, sectors of society and areas of expertise.
- One example is the *White House Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable*—or LAIR. LAIR is co-chaired by our Attorney General and the White House Counsel, and it is a collaboration of 28 federal agency members working to increase access to justice through federal programs.
  - Within the Office for Access to Justice, we house the Executive Director of LAIR, and we staff LAIR's work. We hold annual convenings with the leaders of the federal agency members and issue annual reports on the Roundtable's work.
  - Through LAIR, we also recently launched a first-of-its kind online federal funding resource hub to collect in one place the various federal funding and grants that can be to support legal aid and legal support.

- And another exciting innovation is the recently announced partnership between our office, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and Texas A&M University. Together we developed *the first-ever medical-legal partnership in federal prisons in the United States*, to help address the civil legal needs of federal prisoners and to promote successful reentry after they leave incarceration.
  - As I learned this week, here in the UK, I understand you call these arrangements “health-justice partnerships.”
  - We know that unresolved civil legal issues contribute to recidivism - cycling people who leave prison right back into the criminal justice system. Through this partnership, we hope to disrupt that cycle.
  - Through this program we are engaging in educational efforts on civil legal issues, like family law, debt and access to benefits, and we are utilizing the expertise of medical professionals and legal professionals to assist women incarcerated in federal facilities to apply for disability benefits, so they have better support to succeed upon release from prison.
31. And finally, a critical focus of our work is to advance better data and research to expand access to justice. Data and research are critical to our development of targeted and effective evidence-based solutions.
- One way we have done this is through partnerships with the data and research offices within the Justice Department to facilitate improved access to justice data and research.
  - This includes partnering with the National Institute of Justice on a study reviewing the various models of legal aid in our criminal legal systems across the United States.
  - It also includes a partnership with the Bureau of Justice Statistics on the Access to Justice Design and Testing Program, an inaugural pilot initiative leading up to the launch of a first-ever US national Civil Legal Needs Survey.
  - Our aim through this Program is to conduct a nationwide survey to identify prevalent legal needs, a crucial endeavor as we strategically build solutions to meet these needs. This survey represents a significant milestone as it will be the first government-led comprehensive study of its kind across the United States.
  - This is one of many areas where we can see the possibility for collaboration, as the Civil Justice Council has the expertise and visibility to conduct efforts just like this one.

## Closing

32. As I close, I will again center on this Forum's theme of Working Together. We've discussed how collaboration allows us to see common problems and we've addressed how it allows us to better understand and create solutions.
33. But third and perhaps most importantly, working together allows us to collectively reinvigorate our dedication and vision for what justice *should* look like.
34. If we lose our vision for the future of justice, our path becomes unclear and our resolve weakens.
35. As I fondly retrace my steps as a law student studying here in London, I'm reminded of a legal champion I learned about early on, that embodied this vision and encouraged my passion to pursue a career in public defense.
36. Clara Shortridge Foltz lived during the challenging times of the late 1800s and early 1900s in California.
37. She wanted to become a lawyer, but at the time women were not allowed by law in California to be lawyers. So she authored a state bill, known as the "Woman Lawyer Bill" changed the law, and became the first woman admitted to the California bar.
38. She applied to law school, but again, was denied admission because she was a woman. Again, she did not give up. She drafted an amendment to the California Constitution and filed a lawsuit and argued the case successfully up to the state Supreme Court, opening the door for all women to attend law school.
39. Clara became the first woman lawyer on the West Coast and the third in the United States.
40. But this not the end of her story or her vision. Clara would represent indigent clients in criminal cases, and she was shocked by the injustices she saw – the power imbalance between the accused and the prosecutor, when the accused rarely had a lawyer or legal advice.
41. And at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, during a "congress" of the Board of Lady Managers, Clara made her first highly public presentation of her idea of legal aid in criminal cases.
42. Along the way, with supporters who believed in her vision, Clara advocated for a government-funded criminal legal aid office. And she made it happen - in the face of active opposition. Because she did not give up on this vision, the first public defender, or criminal legal aid office in the United States opened in Los Angeles in 1914. It was a revolutionary and bold idea at the time. It was 50 years before having the right to a lawyer was recognized as a by the U.S. Supreme Court.
43. She had a vision that justice requires an even playing field, a lawyer to represent the State and a lawyer for the accused. And, working together with allies, she made that vision happen.
44. I am inspired by this story because it reminds me that our civil justice system tomorrow does not need to look like it does today.

45. But it also reminds me that change is not inevitable. When others stand with us in our vision, together we have power to shape the story of access to justice for the future.
46. This pursuit will require us to reimagine our systems, and to push for these visions of justice that others may not yet see as possible. It won't always be easy, it may take time and patience, and it can frequently be exhausting. And often, our vision may be met with disbelief, or worse, opposition.
47. Yet when we work together, we learn about each others' successful strategies, we encourage innovation, we promote new ideas and new solutions, and we remain focused on the vision of what justice *should* be.
48. Together, we can confront the belief that legal aid will always be under-resourced and elusive.
49. We can dispel the idea that our laws and legal systems will always be just too complex.
50. Together, we can refuse to concede that achieving civil justice depends upon, as the Lady Chief Justice stated, "how much justice you can [] afford."
51. Together, we can refuse to accept the increasing justice gap, we *can* dismantle access barriers, and we can accelerate meaningful and lasting reforms.
52. And together, we can envision legal systems that can be understood, that effectively meet the needs of the people we serve, that earn and maintain community trust, and that wholistically improve society, promote economic growth and strengthen the rule of law.
53. So as you continue onward, please know that the Office for Access to Justice seeks to work together with you as your partner, supporter and collaborator. Let us join you in the vision of a world where justice belongs to everyone.
54. Thank you for your dedication and inspiration.