

2025 Michael Mills InnovAction Winner & Finalists

Congratulations to the Winner and each of the Finalists for their efforts to use innovation to improve access to justice.

WINNER

Alaska Legal Services Corporation— *Community Justice Worker Resource Center*

Alaska Legal Services Corporation (ALSC) is pioneering the community justice worker (CJW) program—an innovative approach to expanding access to justice by moving beyond traditional attorney and courtroom models. In 2023, ALSC launched the Community Justice Worker Resource Center (CJWRC) to: 1) support the hundreds of CJWs currently training or serving throughout Alaska; and 2) collaborate with partners in the lower 48 to grow a nationwide CJW movement. This project, which serves as a model for other states, is rooted in strong collaboration with tribal and community partners and provides culturally appropriate, community driven legal services to all Alaskans, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas. CJWs, non-attorney volunteers trained in specific legal issues, are embedded in community organizations to assist with civil legal issues affecting the health and safety of community members. The CJWRC develops training and certification standards, supervises cases and outreach, and addresses CJW wellness. The CJWRC has built a statewide network of CJWs that serve Alaskans living in even the most remote villages, ensuring a more accessible, community-centered approach to legal assistance. ALSC continues to expand this successful model further into rural Alaska and assist similarly interested tribal communities throughout the United States.

Key Team Members: Sarah Carver and Joy Anderson, Co-Directors

FINALISTS

Center for Access to QDROs—*QDRO Assistance for Self-Help Centers*

Imagine you're living in your car, relying on public benefits, taking out loans with predatory interest rates to keep yourself fed and clothed. While mired in these desperate circumstances, you're haunted by the knowledge that funds which belong to you and could provide much-needed income are just beyond your reach.



(l to r: David Schaefer [Calibrate—sponsor]; Sarah Carver [Alaska Legal Services Corporation]; Jennifer Johnson [Calibrate—sponsor]; Rick Kathuria [2025 Judging Panel Chair])



You were awarded a marital share of a retirement benefit at divorce, but the retirement plan says it cannot pay until you have something called a QDRO. It costs thousands of dollars to have one prepared. You try to do it on your own, but the plan or the court rejects it. While you struggle, your financial lifeline is trapped behind bewildering legalese. Retirement benefit division at divorce is a two-tiered system: if you have money to pay for a QDRO, you receive your share of marital retirement benefits. If you cannot pay for a QDRO, money that is yours exists behind an opaque and confusing barrier called a QDRO. The Center eliminates this red tape for low-income people with our first-in-the-nation program designed to create an entirely new pipeline for QDRO services for low-income litigants served by self-help centers.

Center for Law, Tech, and Social Good at the University of San Francisco, School of Law—*Blockchain Legislative Definitions (BLD) Project*

The Blockchain Legislative Definitions (BLD) Project is a first-of-kind initiative to address the fragmented and inconsistent language in blockchain and cryptocurrency legislation across U.S. jurisdictions. Unlike existing resources, which primarily track proposed regulations, the BLD repository focuses on standardizing legal terms and definitions in enacted laws and unifying blockchain regulations in one place. This innovative approach tackles a crucial problem: inconsistent legislative terminology creates regulatory confusion, stifles innovation, and imposes unnecessary compliance burdens on industry stakeholders. By aggregating and analyzing legislative data in the U.S. from 18 sources, the BLD provides a comprehensive tool for policymakers, researchers, and legal professionals. It enables users to identify gaps, analyze trends, and promote regulatory consistency across state lines. This centralized repository empowers government officials to draft clearer and more effective laws, while also reducing costs for founders navigating a complex regulatory environment. Furthermore, it builds public trust in blockchain technology by creating a stable legal framework. By bridging the gap between legislative language and practical policymaking, the BLD Project contributes to a more cohesive regulatory landscape, unlocking blockchain's transformative potential for innovation and social good.

Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto—*Breaking Down Barriers to Removal Defense*

Access to justice in immigration court can be the difference between life and death for asylum seekers fleeing violence in their home countries. But removal defense can take years, hours of research and motion writing to put forth a valid claim that can win. Our Immigration and Pro Bono teams have the expertise and experience, but we cannot take every case. In the past year, we've leveraged all the tools at our disposal to breakdown a case into manageable parts to impact more asylum seekers and improve access to justice in immigration court. At CLSEPA, we use our expert attorneys when their depth of knowledge and familiarity with immigration law is most needed – at initial screening, mentorship for substantive questions during the life of the case, and in reviewing forms and submissions to the court. We leverage our pro bono partners' support in both the limited scope clinic model and with full scope representation. Pro bono attorneys draft pro se applications for asylum, work

permits, and adjustment of status. With accessible and consistent training, resources, and mentorship, we are growing the availability of attorneys who can support asylum seekers through each step of their case.

Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library—*LAWPod (Legal Access Workspace)*

Each year, thousands of self-represented litigants visit the Harris County Robert W. Hainsworth Law Library in downtown Houston for assistance with navigating free, online legal information, law library resources, and referrals to legal aid organizations. However, the barriers of traveling downtown and of affording personal technology to remotely access digital information threaten to leave behind those who are already struggling to access justice. In response to these barriers, the Harris County Law Library conceived the LAWPod initiative to offer law library services remotely through workspaces constructed at local public library branches. The LAW (Legal Access Workspace) Pod features a standalone, small-footprint, sound-dampening design, with strategic placement in public libraries, allowing patrons to access legal information resources with the remote guidance of law librarians at a convenient location. In recent years, a few law libraries and legal organizations have launched similar initiatives; many libraries and courts provide kiosks with self-help functions, some with the capability to connect remotely with a kiosk navigator for technical assistance or general procedural questions. However, the LAWPod initiative is unique because the LAWPod is designed to remove geographic and technology-based barriers to deliver law library services where patrons' needs are most underserved.

Legal Aid of North Carolina—*Innovation Lab*

Legal Aid of North Carolina's Innovation Lab is transforming legal service delivery with a bold mission: to bridge the justice gap and provide equitable access to legal resources in rural areas. This groundbreaking initiative harnesses technology and design thinking to reimagine how legal services can be delivered, focusing on under-represented communities. The Lab brings together clients, community partners, law schools, and justice tech experts to co-create solutions that integrate innovative technologies and best practices into the legal process. Through projects like virtual legal clinics, AI-powered legal tools, and mobile-friendly platforms, the Lab is removing traditional barriers to justice, offering real-time legal guidance, and empowering individuals with accessible legal support.

Legal Aid of North Carolina—*LIA (Legal Information Assistant): Closing the Access to Justice Gap Through AI-Powered Legal Assistance*

Imagine a world where underserved communities facing critical legal challenges—eviction, disaster recovery, or domestic violence—can access reliable legal information instantly, in their preferred language, and at any time of the day or night. LIA, the Legal Information Assistant, is making this vision a reality. LIA is an innovative AI-powered virtual assistant addressing the critical need for accessible legal information among underserved communities. Developed in partnership with LawDroid,

LIA leverages generative AI and human-centered design to deliver fast, accurate, and plain-language responses to legal questions. Accessible 24/7 via Legal Aid of North Carolina’s website, LIA bridges the justice gap by scaling the delivery of essential legal services, offering multilingual support and step-by-step guidance to empower users. Since its launch, LIA has handled over 16,600 user interactions, demonstrating measurable success in equipping individuals to navigate legal challenges effectively. Designed on LawDroid’s intuitive, no-code platform, LIA empowers Legal Aid of North Carolina to quickly update the system independently (without technical assistance), enabling real-time responses to critical needs such as providing disaster relief information during emergencies like Hurricane Helene. By doing so, LIA not only transforms access to justice but also exemplifies adaptability in addressing evolving community challenges.

NC Equal Access to Justice Foundation—*Driver’s License Restoration Project*

The NC Equal Access to Justice Foundation launched its Driver’s License Restoration Project (DLRP) in 2019 and has since served over 6,500 clients across North Carolina. North Carolina is one of 30 states where driver’s licenses are suspended for missed court appearances or unpaid fines. This practice disproportionately affects low-income individuals, with a Harvard Law School report noting license suspensions as “one of the most pervasive poverty traps” for people unable to pay fines. These suspensions especially burden rural North Carolinians without public transportation and African American drivers, who are four times more likely than their white counterparts to face suspensions for unpaid fees. Navigating the court and DMV bureaucracy involved in restoring a driver’s license often requires an attorney, yet this issue falls outside the scope of public defenders and most legal aid providers. The DLRP operates with a small staff—two full-time attorneys and one part-time paralegal—yet manages to assist around 1,500 clients each year. Leveraging tools like Airtable, Formstack, and Zapier, DLRP amplifies its impact by involving pro bono attorneys to draft license restoration advice letters, increasing the project’s reach and effectiveness despite its limited staffing.