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Supreme Court of Virginia Establishes Access to Justice Commission

The Supreme Court of Virginia has established the Virginia Access to Justice Commission. The mission of the Commission, which will be comprised of judges, lawyers, and others, is to promote equal access to justice in Virginia, with particular emphasis on the civil legal needs of Virginia residents. In establishing the Commission, Virginia joins 28 other states with Access to Justice Commissions charged with expanding access to civil justice for low income and disadvantaged persons.

Utilizing an Access to Justice Commission Expansion Project Grant from the American Bar Association, the Supreme Court of Virginia convened an Access to Justice Planning Committee, chaired by Justice S. Bernard Goodwyn, in early 2013 to discuss access to justice needs for low income individuals in Virginia. The Committee was charged with discussing whether an access to justice commission was needed in Virginia and, if so, what direction such a commission should take. The Committee recommended to the Court the creation of the Virginia Access to Justice Commission. The goals of the Commission include coordinating access to justice activities among various groups, mobilizing legal professionals to provide legal services to low income individuals, and encouraging the development of auxiliary resources for underserved populations.

"In simple terms, access to justice means that courts must be accessible to every person who desires or is required to use them. The Virginia Access to Justice Commission will help the judiciary fulfill its mission to provide an independent, accessible, responsive forum for the just resolution of disputes."

- Cynthia D. Kinser, Chief Justice, Supreme Court of Virginia

"Establishment of an Access to Justice Commission will benefit all Virginians by maximizing existing resources to facilitate increased access to courts and legal services."

- S. Bernard Goodwyn, Justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia and Chair of the Access to Justice Planning Committee

The formation of the Virginia Access to Justice Commission is consistent with Vision 3 of the current Strategic Plan for Virginia's Judicial System, adopted in 2009, which states that Virginia's courts will "maintain human dignity and provide effective access to justice for all persons." The establishment of the Virginia Access to Justice Commission ensures that an entity is actively coordinating and promoting access to justice efforts in the Commonwealth.

The order establishing the Commission was entered September 13, 2013. Commission members are expected to be appointed by the Chief Justice in the near future.

About the Supreme Court of Virginia: The Supreme Court of Virginia possesses both original and appellate jurisdiction. The Court reviews decisions of lower courts, including the Court of Appeals, from which appeals have been allowed. Virginia does not allow an appeal to the Supreme Court as a matter of right except in cases involving the State Corporation Commission, certain disciplinary actions against an attorney, and review of the death penalty. The Court's original jurisdiction is limited to cases of habeas corpus, mandamus, prohibition, and actual innocence. The Supreme Court also has original jurisdiction in matters filed by the Judicial Inquiry and Review Commission relating to judicial censure and retirement, and removal of judges. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court serves as the administrative head of Virginia's Judicial System. The Chief Justice is charged with overseeing the efficient and effective operation of the Judicial Branch.

Strategic Plan for Virginia's Judicial System (2009), *Virginia's Courts in the 21st Century: To Benefit All, To Exclude None*:

http://www.courts.state.va.us/courtadmin/aoc/judpln/reports/2009_strat_plan.pdf

For more information about the Virginia Access to Justice Commission, please contact Pat G. Davis, Office of the Executive Secretary, Supreme Court of Virginia, at (804) 225-3213.