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## Don't look to others to close justice gap; take a look in the mirror

Stop asking what the answer is; be the answer." Toussaint Romain, former assistant public defender of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Defender's Office, challenged attendees with this statement at the end of the third annual Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism's The Future Is Now conference on May 2.

The Future Is Now conference has become the signature annual event for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. The goal of the conference is to foster learning, inspiration and conversations about innovations in the delivery of legal services.

At this year's conference, 10 experts from around the country presented a series of compelling TED-like talks followed by town hall discussions. Lawyers, entrepreneurs and innovators gathered to discuss topics such as the practicality of artificial intelligence, legal research algorithms, retaining diverse talent, the ethical obligations of data analytics and equal justice to name just a few. Access to justice was theme heard throughout the conference.

### The access to justice gap answer

The legal profession needs to act and be the answer to the access to justice gap according to conference speaker John Levi, board chairman of the Legal Services Corp. The agency defines the access to justice gap as the difference between the civil legal needs of low-income Americans and resources available to meet those needs.

In "The Justice Gap Report 2017," the agency noted that 86 percent of civil legal problems reported by low-income Americans in the past year received inadequate or no legal help.

Levi told the Future is Now conference attendees that they cannot settle for these numbers as the answer. He reminded the conference crowd of almost 400 that access to justice is promised to all Americans — starting with the preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

### Answers are available

So, how can the legal profession close this 86 percent access to justice gap? How can it be done after hearing Levi report that the Legal Services Corp. budget is smaller than what Americans spend on Halloween costumes for their pets? Luckily for the conference attendees, Levi and Paladin co-founder and Chief Operating Officer Kristen Sondag provided some answers.

Levi reported that current answers to the justice gap include bipartisan forums on improving access to justice, technology and pro bono. Both Republicans and Democrats support equal access to justice. In a divisive world, equal access to justice is something most people support.

Through its technology initiative grants, the agency ensures that all 50 states have a website

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that includes legal information for people to easily access and understand. In Illinois, the website is Illinois Legal Aid Online. Legal Services Corp. is also partnering with Microsoft on a pilot program to simplify access to legal support.

According to Levi, if pro bono lawyers have adequate resources

### PROFESSIONALISM ON POINT



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and are supported through things like the agency's pro bono innovation grants, pro bono efforts can assist in narrowing the access to the justice gap.

### Technology and pro bono answers

In her presentation, Sondag continued to emphasize technology and pro bono as part of the answer to closing the access to the justice gap. Sondag highlighted that even though more legal technology is being built than ever

before, the access to justice gap in the country keeps widening.

The main reasons she sees for this are a lack of diverse representation from diverse communities within legal tech and a lack of focus by the legal tech community on problems that affect access to justice. The subsequent impact of this is design bias and

not reaching the right audiences.

However, answers are available and being tested. Sondag highlighted the work of a Legal Services Corp. technology grant recipients, nonprofits, fellowships and school programs, as well as her own company, Paladin, which uses technology to streamline pro bono services.

### The answer is action

The Future Is Now conference talks and town hall discussions are over. It is now time to act. Per ABA Model Rule 6.1, every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay.

What should you do to assist in closing the access to justice gap?

Do something that speaks to and inspires you. Be the answer. Look into getting more involved in the ideas Levi and Sondag discussed at the conference.

If those ideas don't spark your interest, there are plenty of other opportunities. There are three legal services organizations in Illinois that can use pro bono assistance: LAF, Prairie State Legal Services and Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation.

Check out a list of current volunteer opportunities throughout Illinois on Illinois Legal Aid Online's website. If making a donation is an option, there are resources that direct you to make an informed decision about where to donate.

The Chicago Bar Foundation, Illinois Bar Foundation and PILI are also excellent pro bono resources. Keep in mind that this is only a small sampling of organizations dedicated to closing the access to justice gap in Illinois.

Even with all the above suggestions, if you still feel you don't have an answer, create one. Make it happen. The only wrong answer is to do nothing.