



Justice Gap Scoping Work Group – Progress Summary

Updated June 2026

Overview

The Justice Gap Scoping Work Group was convened to understand the most significant barriers Washington residents face when trying to resolve civil and criminal-adjacent legal problems—and to identify what the statewide system needs in order to close those gaps.

This group is composed of community leaders, legal practitioners, system partners, and people with lived experience. Over several months, the Work Group is completing research, consulting statewide experts, and coordinating with agencies and providers.

This report summarizes what has been accomplished to date. It does **not** reflect final recommendations and should be viewed as a progress update for partners following the project.

Work Completed So Far

Retreat One (May 4, 2026)

Retreat One focused on grounding the Work Group in shared purpose, research expectations, and the roadmap for the months ahead.

Key components included:

- **Orientation to the statewide effort:**
Members learned about the project timeline, communication channels, and expectations for participation.
- **Literature Review Launch:**
The group received an overview of the extensive set of reports, studies, and evaluations previously conducted in Washington and nationwide.
Members were trained on the analytic template used to evaluate each source and were assigned specific topics to review.
- **Mapping the Work Ahead:**
The Work Group clarified how future retreats would build toward final deliverables and how questions, themes, and gaps would be tracked.
- **Closing reflection:**
Members shared early insights, perspectives they hope to hear in future sessions, and immediate questions emerging from the literature.

The Literature Review (Ongoing)

To avoid duplicating past efforts and ensure the Work Group builds on the strongest evidence available, members conducted a structured review of national and statewide studies on:

- Civil legal needs
- Criminal-civil system overlaps
- Triage and intake models
- Alternative legal service provider frameworks
- Rural access, language access, and technology-enabled justice
- Market-based solutions such as low bono and unbundled services
- Court modernization and unified system models

Each member evaluated sources using a standardized rubric addressing methodology, equity impacts, scalability, and applicability in Washington. Themes surfaced in the literature are now helping the Work Group:

- Identify where Washington is leading or lagging behind other jurisdictions
- Understand emerging innovations being tested nationally
- Recognize persistent structural barriers across states

- Narrow the set of questions for further inquiry

The findings from this review will continue to shape later phases of consultation and analysis.

Retreat Two (June 1, 2026)

While Retreat One focused on research foundations, Retreat Two shifted toward listening and learning from experts who work directly in Washington’s legal system. This retreat included three in-depth roundtable sessions: Regulatory Boards, Attorney Groups, and Civil Legal Aid Providers.

Regulatory Boards

LLLT Board, Practice of Law Board, APR 6 Law Clerk Board

Regulatory partners offered insights into existing licensing frameworks, new pathways into the profession, and the regulatory considerations that impact innovation.

Key themes included:

- History and evolution of the LLLT license, and exploration of future models
- The Entity Regulation Pilot, which allows innovative legal service models to be tested under structured oversight
- The APR 6 Law Clerk Program, which is rapidly growing and expanding access to legal careers, especially in rural and immigrant communities
- Considerations around consumer protection, quality assurance, and training standards
- Interest in expanding non-lawyer roles in a safe, structured, measurable way

These perspectives helped the Work Group understand the regulatory levers that can support or constrain system change.

Attorney Groups

Office of Public Defense, Low Bono Section, Star Council

Attorney groups shared their views on gaps in representation, market forces affecting service delivery, and the realities of current legal practice.

Key themes:

- Inconsistent access to public defense across jurisdictions due to Washington’s non-unified court structure
- Growing interest in low-bono and modest-means practices—but significant financial pressures that limit sustainability
- The severe shortage of attorneys in rural communities (“legal deserts”)
- Structural and economic barriers preventing many people from entering or staying in the legal profession
- Opportunities to use non-lawyer roles and technology to expand reach

These insights underscore the need for solutions that address both supply-side and structural barriers.

Civil Legal Aid Providers

Northwest Justice Project/CLEAR, Columbia Legal Services, Pro Bono Council, TeamChild

Civil legal aid organizations described where Washington’s system is working well—and where major gaps remain.

Key themes include:

- The breadth of Washington’s civil legal aid network, but insufficient capacity to meet demand
- Significant needs in family law, housing, language access, immigration, reentry, youth education, and administrative hearings
- Ongoing success of WashingtonLawHelp as a statewide self-help resource
- The potential for non-attorney “justice worker” roles to expand reach
- The importance of integrated civil-criminal support, especially for youth and people reentering the community
- Technology and data infrastructure needs across the statewide network

These perspectives provided the Work Group with a deeper understanding of on-the-ground realities in legal aid delivery.

What the Work Group Is Learning

Across the retreats, literature review, and roundtables, several cross-cutting insights are emerging:

- **The justice gap is structural, not incidental.**
Inconsistent processes, fragmented courts, and siloed systems create barriers even where resources exist.
- **No single solution will close the gap.**
Providers across sectors emphasize that Washington needs multiple, parallel pathways—including lawyers, non-lawyer navigators, technology, and community-based roles.
- **Equity must be centered.**
Nearly every partner identified populations who face disproportionate barriers: rural residents, youth, people with disabilities, LEP communities, Indigenous and immigrant communities, and people exiting incarceration.
- **Modernization and infrastructure are essential.**
From referral systems to court technology to interpreter pipelines, statewide infrastructure must evolve for solutions to succeed.

What Comes Next

The Work Group will continue:

- Synthesizing findings from the literature
- Conducting additional consultations – including partners from other states who have explored innovative solutions
- Refining the problem statements and scope
- Identifying key areas for deeper exploration

Future retreats and discussions will further shape the Work Group’s understanding before any recommendations are drafted.