

DOJ Access to Justice Leader Prioritizes Longevity for Lasting Impact on Legal Access

The Office for Access to Justice in the U.S. Department of Justice (Justice) has been revived after being shut down over a decade ago. This office, led by Nina Rossi, is essential in ensuring equal access to Justice and is actively working to support several states considering rule changes that would allow non-lawyers to own legal operations.

When Justice posted for attorney positions, Rossi was “blown away” by the level of interest. The office has grown to 19 people, including seven attorneys, and plans to hire eight more in the next two months. Additionally, Justice has re-launched its Language Access Working Group—a partnership with the Civil Rights Division—to help ensure non-English speakers can access department programs.

Justice has also moved the Federal Government Pro Bono Program to Rossi’s office and added a second staff member to this unit. This program ensures no conflicts of interest when government lawyers take pro bono cases. Furthermore, Rossi hopes Big Law firms will increase their pro bono efforts, although she noted that Justice must be “careful” when partnering with outside law firms it may be prosecuted against.

For years, advocates have called for states like Arizona and Utah to allow non-lawyers to own legal operations. This could open up access to lower prices and more efficient technology. Ross visited Utah in October to learn more about their regulatory experiment and plans to travel to Arizona. She believes her office is in an information-gathering role; however, they are seeking the “best lane” for Justice and the administration to take as they move forward on this issue.

Rossi also expressed hope in the Office for Access to Justice Establishment Act, which would make her office permanent. She believes now is the time to ensure that this office works for the long haul; with strong internal and external support, she is optimistic about the future of access to Justice. Ultimately, having an Office for Access to Justice helps guarantee everyone equal access to Justice, regardless of their background or financial status. That is a mission that Rossi and her team are fully committed to.

REFERENCES:

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