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## Nikole Nelson champions a national model to bring legal services to those without access

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*Nikole Nelson brought legal help to remote Alaskan communities. (Photo courtesy of Nikole Nelson)*

Nikole Nelson spent much of her career trying to close the justice gap in Alaska.

As the executive director of Alaska Legal Services Corp., Nelson helped provide free civil legal aid to low-income residents in about a dozen communities across the state. But Nelson and her team encountered many other people they couldn't assist because of a lack of resources.

"One of the things I struggled with for a very long time was although we were providing really great help to the community, we had to turn people away," says Nelson, who was executive director for 13 of her 25 years with Alaska Legal Services Corp. "It was one person for every one that we accepted."

In traveling throughout Alaska, often by small plane, Nelson realized there were more than 200 remote villages and

communities that weren't connected to the state's road system. The residents of these mostly Indigenous communities didn't have access to legal services. They did, however, have health care facilities.

"We noticed at that point that the tribally operated health care system had an outpost in every single community," says Nelson, who worked with tribal health providers and the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium to create a network of medical-legal partnerships in 2017. "And originally, the idea was to expand legal aid's reach by inserting lawyers into places they weren't."

The Partnering for Native Health program, which embeds attorneys and other advocates in health care facilities to help patients address the legal problems that affect their health, was recognized by the World Justice Project as one of the top five global access-to-justice initiatives in 2019. Jim Sandman, then-president of the Legal Services Corp., worked closely with Nelson. He refers to her as one of his heroes, praising in particular her devotion to delivering legal aid to low-income people in a challenging environment.

"Nikole is not a native of Alaska, but she has the Alaska frontier spirit," Sandman says. "She figured out ways to work with what she had and was always thinking outside the box."

"In the world of legal aid, where you never ever have enough resources to serve the needs of low-income people, that's exactly the spirit you need."

## Access to justice in Alaska

Nelson, who grew up in Magna, Utah, and always planned to pursue public interest work, didn't stop there.

The World Justice Project recognized another innovative aspect of Partnering for Native Health that Nelson began working on in 2018.

Through her health care partners, Nelson learned about Alaska's tribal community health aide program. Under this model, trained community members provide medical, dental and behavioral health care in remote areas under the supervision of licensed clinicians.

"We thought, 'Oh, we should really be doing this in the justice space,'" says Nelson, a 1997 graduate of Willamette University School of Law. "We started developing programs to train people who are community-based with some basic legal skills so they could help their neighbors."



Alaska Legal Services Corp., in partnership with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and Alaska Pacific University, launched the Community Justice Worker program in 2019.

The program trains nonlawyers—including paralegals, tribal employees and community health aides—to supplement existing efforts by legal aid and pro bono attorneys. Under the supervision of attorneys, these community justice workers can help appeal public benefit denials, draft wills and handle Indian Child Welfare Act matters.

Nelson, who describes the program as the first of its kind in the nation, also led the reform of restrictions on the unauthorized practice of law for community justice workers in Alaska. In 2022, the Alaska Supreme Court approved a new state bar rule that allows community justice workers to provide legal assistance in certain civil matters if they are trained and supervised by Alaska Legal Services Corp. and if clients give informed consent. The Alaska Bar Association's board of governors must also approve the work.

"There was a lot of work that our community justice workers could do in Alaska without needing to change the laws or to change the court rules," Nelson says. "But when we realized we had some success, that the program was growing like gangbusters, and we were recruiting people effortlessly, we wanted to plan for the future."

Under the state bar rule, community justice workers can represent clients in court, Nelson adds.

## Closing the justice gap

In October 2023, Nelson became the founding CEO of Frontline Justice, a national organization that is mobilizing, training and supporting community justice workers.

After seeing the success of Alaska Legal Services Corp.'s Community Justice Worker program, Nelson became a firm believer in the model and wanted to bring it to other jurisdictions around the country.

"It is the only thing I've seen during my 25 years in legal aid that has the capacity to scale and to bring us to the point where we could meet the community demand for services," Nelson says. She is a member of the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense, which sponsored a resolution at the 2025 ABA Annual Meeting in August encouraging courts to consider adopting community justice worker programs. The ABA House of Delegates adopted the resolution.

As of September, more than 20 states have passed or proposed rules to authorize community justice worker programs or were actively developing them.

Part of Nelson's role with Frontline Justice is helping community stakeholders develop unauthorized practice of law carve-outs that allow community justice workers to operate in various states.

Nelson also created a national task force to explore best practices for training and credentialing programs for community justice workers. She and its other members are focusing on developing evidence-based models that jurisdictions can use once they authorize community justice workers.

Building coalitions is one of Nelson's key strengths, says Rebecca Sandefur, a co-founder of Frontline Justice who has known Nelson for at least a decade.

"She has a wonderful expression that 'You have to move at the speed of trust,' and I think when you're trying to do hard things in the world, you need a lot of people to come together," says Sandefur, who is also a professor at Arizona State University and a faculty fellow at the American Bar Foundation. "Being thoughtful about how to bring those relationships together and nurture them is a really great gift that she has."

In addition to expanding access to legal services, Nelson believes the community justice worker model serves other vital functions. One of those is providing holistic support to people who are experiencing difficult times and may not know where to turn.

"Oftentimes, the justice workers who come in with these different backgrounds and skills, they are trusted helpers within the community and can connect with people in a different way," says Nelson, who is still based in Anchorage, Alaska. "They meet people where they are and can help them understand how our legal system interacts with their lives."

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