



Annual Grant Guidelines for CY 2026

(Grant Period: January 1 – December 31, 2026)

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Part I. Grant Guidelines¹

Background

The Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois (LTF) is a private, not-for-profit foundation incorporated by the Illinois State Bar Association and The Chicago Bar Association in 1983. Under rules established by the

¹ Guidelines approved by LTF Board of Directors June 30, 2025

Illinois Supreme Court, the Lawyers Trust Fund receives revenue from the Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) program; a portion of the annual registration fee paid by Illinois attorneys; and the remittance of unidentified funds from IOLTA accounts. LTF uses the income from these sources to support the provision of direct legal aid services to low-income Illinoisans with civil legal problems.

LTF Grantmaking Goals

LTF makes grants to Illinois non-profit organizations that provide legal aid services free of charge to low-income families and individuals residing in Illinois. LTF awards grants annually, on a calendar-year basis.

In allocating grant funds and making awards to individual organizations, LTF prioritizes the following broad goals:

- 1. Supporting the availability of direct legal aid services throughout the state.**
- 2. Encouraging the use of a variety of methods to deliver services (e.g., advice desks, brief service projects, neighborhood clinics, unbundled representation, technology-based tools, extended representation by staff and volunteer attorneys).**
- 3. Supporting legal services that address the most critical needs of low-income individuals and families, including health, personal safety, family stability, housing, and economic security.**
- 4. Supporting legal services that assist low-income individuals and families in overcoming barriers and helping them attain full participation in society.**
- 5. Supporting legal services to meet critical needs that otherwise would not be addressed due to geographic location, area of the law, and/or client characteristics.**

Eligibility for Grants

LTF funds entities that provide direct legal aid services to low-income Illinois individuals and families. These entities include (1) organizations whose primary focus is on providing legal aid services, and (2) legal aid programs that are distinct sub-units or programs of larger organizations (such as social service providers). Whether an application for funding comes from an organization focused on legal aid or from a program that is part of a larger entity, LTF grants are limited to supporting the delivery of legal aid services.

LTF will support law school clinics only if the LTF board determines that the legal aid services provided by the clinic are unique in terms of the types of services offered or the target population to whom services are offered (*i.e.*, no other legal aid entity is providing the same services or targeting the same population).

LTF makes grants to support the delivery of direct legal aid services to individuals (including legal guidance, limited scope assistance, and direct representation of individuals) by organizations that meet the eligibility requirements listed below. Funds granted by LTF may not be used to support the provision of mediation services, representation in class-action litigation, or policy advocacy.

To be eligible for grant funding from LTF, applicants must meet the following requirements:

- 1) Be an Illinois non-profit organization that is tax-exempt under 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.
- 2) Serve Illinois residents who cannot afford to hire private legal counsel, which is generally defined as having incomes below 150% of the federal poverty guidelines.
- 3) Provide services without charge to the client. [*Note: This does not mean applicants cannot charge sliding-scale fees to clients with incomes above 150% of the federal poverty guidelines, nor does it mean that grantees cannot require clients to pay court costs or related expenses that cannot be waived. However, LTF funds can only be used to support free services.*]
- 4) Employ at least one (1) paid, full-time equivalent staff attorney who has been licensed to practice for a minimum of three years at the time the application is due. However, emerging organizations or legal aid programs based in under-resourced communities may seek a waiver of this requirement from LTF through the process described in the instructions section of this document. Waiver decisions will be granted at the sole discretion of the LTF board of directors. In assessing emerging organizations and programs seeking a waiver, LTF will consider characteristics including but not limited to the organization or program's revenues and budget; staff size; longevity; and sources of institutional support.

Minimum Grant Amount

In 2023 LTF implemented a minimum annual grant amount of \$25,000. For CY 2026, LTF will continue this policy and will not make annual grant awards of less than \$25,000.

Factors in Determining Grant Awards

In reviewing applications and making funding decisions regarding grants, LTF will consider the following questions regarding service delivery and organizational capacity:

Service Delivery

LTF seeks to make grants to organizations and programs that will deliver substantial amounts of high-quality, direct legal aid services. Accordingly, LTF will consider the following in its evaluation of grant applications:

1. **Scope of Work:** Is the work LTF is being asked to support clearly defined and focused on directly addressing critical civil legal needs of low-income Illinoisans?
2. **Legal Needs Addressed:** What type of legal problem(s) and client need(s) does the applicant address? Are these critical needs for low-income individuals and families? Do the applicant's services assist low-income individuals and families in overcoming barriers to meeting their needs? Are these services unique or are they also addressed by other organizations serving the same client population and/or geographic area? Is there evidence that the applicant is responsive to evolving community needs?
3. **Levels of Service:** Does the applicant provide appropriate levels of service (*e.g.*, brief services, litigation) to effectively address client needs, based on its mission and priorities? How does the applicant evaluate and improve its delivery of services? Has the applicant taken steps to adjust the levels of service it provides?
4. **Clients Populations Served:** Does the applicant provide services to a representative cross-section of the low-income population of the geographic area(s) it serves and/or target services to one or more distinct, traditionally underserved or at-risk subgroups (*e.g.*, veterans, homeless youths)? Does the applicant conduct outreach and use strategies to ensure that its services are accessible?
5. **Efficient & Effective Service Delivery:** Does the applicant use delivery methods that balance efficiency, effectiveness, and accessibility? How does the applicant use technology to increase and improve services? Has the applicant taken any steps to try to increase the number of clients provided with representation?
6. **Quality:** Does the applicant have systems of quality control in place? Do case-handlers and supervisory personnel have adequate levels of experience? Are training and mentoring opportunities available for staff and/or volunteers?
7. **Use of Volunteers:** Does the applicant make appropriate use of volunteers, both as case-handlers and in other capacities? Does the applicant have systems in place to recruit, train, support, monitor, recognize, and retain volunteers?

Organizational Capacity

LTF seeks to make grants to organizations and programs that demonstrate the capacity to sustainably deliver the legal services proposed in the application. Accordingly, LTF will consider the following questions regarding the applicant:

1. **Infrastructure:** Are there adequate systems and structures in place to oversee and support the applicant's legal work (e.g., staff-level management, information technology, human resources, fundraising)?
2. **Leadership:** Does the leadership team have the necessary skills and experience in the areas of fiscal management, personnel management, and the supervision of legal work? Has the applicant made efforts to develop a leadership team (executive and senior management) that represents a variety of demographic groups and lived experiences?
3. **Governance:** Does the applicant have a governing board with skills and experience to oversee the organization? Does the membership of the board reflect the population of its service area, and (to the extent possible) the specific client population the organization serves? Does the board develop new leaders and encourage board renewal through limits on officers' terms and/or board tenure?
4. **Staff Composition:** Does the applicant employ staff from various backgrounds? Has the applicant made efforts to develop a staff that includes people from a variety of demographic groups and lived experiences? Has the applicant undertaken initiatives to build a healthy workplace culture and retain staff?
5. **Financial Viability:** Does the legal services work for which funding is sought from LTF have other sources of financial support? Is this financial support broad, or reliant on one or two major sources? How secure is this support? Is there evidence that the organization is making efforts to increase its fundraising revenue and tap into new funding sources?
6. **Fiscal Management:** Does the applicant have adequate internal controls and accounting policies in place? Is there evidence of adequate fiscal oversight by the governing board?

Part II. Annual Grant Funding Target for CY 2026

LTF's board has identified a preliminary target amount of **\$31 million** for the CY 2026 Annual Grant Cycle. This preliminary target – which is subject to change – would be an increase of nearly \$5 million over the total annual grants awarded for CY 2025.

LTF expects to use these funds to increase annual support to grantees, and to support new applicants that make a strong case for an initial grant from LTF. While this increase in legal aid funding is welcome, LTF anticipates requests for increased support from current grantees and new applicants in response to the uncertainty of federal grants that support legal aid and other human services. LTF's grants process is competitive. Applications for funding are evaluated for their individual merit, but allocating funding from a fixed pool means LTF will weigh each grant application relative to others in making grant awards.

Current grantees may seek increases in annual support to maintain or increase service delivery as well as to support organizational needs (such as staffing, technology, and infrastructure). This includes requests based on financial need. Requests for one-time funding are not encouraged and will be funded sparingly.

LTF will assess all applications in light of the goals, eligibility criteria, and factors identified in these guidelines. LTF's assessment also will be informed by the goals and framework of the [Strategic Plan](#) adopted by LTF's board in 2022.

Applicants seeking a grant increase for CY 2026 will be required to explain their request in the grant application. New applicants will be required to make a case for first-time funding from LTF.

Part III. Grant Application Instructions for CY 2026

Online Application Portal

Current grantees and new applicants must use LTF's application portal ([GOApply](#)) to complete and submit applications for LTF funding. New applicants must register as new users and will need approval from LTF before accessing the portal and online application. LTF has published a User Guide and other materials on its [Applicant Support page](#) to help applicants in completing the online application.

Applying for a Grant: Key Dates

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| CY 2026 Annual Grant application available on GOapply portal | July 8, 2025 |
| Open door for questions about LTF grants and funding opportunity and applicant support | By request beginning July 9 |
| New applicant information session - via Zoom (<i>register in advance with email to nebula@ltf.org</i>) | July 17 at 10:00am |
| General grant application information session - via Zoom (<i>register in advance with email to nebula@ltf.org</i>) | July 24 at 2:00pm |
| New applicant information session - via Zoom (<i>repeats July 17 session; register in advance with email to nebula@ltf.org</i>) | July 29 at 2:00pm |
| General grant application information session - via Zoom (<i>repeats July 29 session; register in advance with email to nebula@ltf.org</i>) | August 4 at 10:00am |
| Deadline for requesting pre-application waiver of one-attorney requirement (see details on pages 9 and 10) | August 15 before 6:00pm |
| Completed applications due | September 15 before 6:00pm |
| Grant decisions made by LTF board | December 2025 |
| Applicants notified of grant decisions | December 2025 |
| Initial CY 2026 grant payment | January 2026 |

Information and Support for Grant Applicants

To help current grantees and prospective applicants understand LTF's grant guidelines, funding criteria, and application procedures, LTF offers several opportunities to connect with LTF staff:

- **Open Door Policy:** Call or email LTF staff with any questions about grants, the application process, and completing an application.
 - For information about LTF’s grant guidelines and priorities, LTF grants in general, and applying for a CY 2026 grant, contact:
 - David Holtermann, Deputy Executive Director for Grants & Legal Affairs (312-938-3076 or david@ltf.org)
 - For technical support completing the application and data collection pages, contact:
 - Nebula Li (312-938-2106 or nebula@ltf.org)
 - David Holtermann (312-938-3076 or david@ltf.org)
- **General Grant Application Information Sessions:** LTF will host two Zoom webinars for a general orientation to the grant application and process. These sessions will cover changes for 2026. Current grantees and new applicants are welcome to participate, but participation is optional.
 - Sessions are scheduled for July 24 and August 4. The two sessions will cover the same information.
 - Register in advance by emailing Nebula Li (nebula@ltf.org). You will receive an email with instructions for joining the session shortly in advance of the session.
- **New Applicant Information Sessions:** LTF will host two additional Zoom webinars specifically for prospective applicants that are not current LTF grantees. This session will explain LTF’s grant guidelines, eligibility criteria, and application. Participation in these sessions is optional.
 - Sessions are scheduled for July 17 and July 29. The two sessions will cover the same information.
 - Register in advance by emailing Nebula Li (nebula@ltf.org). You will receive an email with instructions for joining the session shortly in advance of the session.
- **Online Applicant Support:** A user guide for the GOapply application portal, instructions for completing the data portions of the grant application, and other resources and information for applicants are available on [LTF’s Applicant Support web page](#).

Applying as an Organization or as a Program: What is the Difference?

In its grantmaking to support direct legal aid, LTF provides funding to a variety of entities, including organizations focused on delivering legal services; legal aid programs operating as distinct sub-units of larger organizations; and law school clinics. Regardless of the nature of the entity requesting funding, LTF grants are limited to supporting the provision of free, direct legal assistance to individuals and families in civil cases.

When completing this application, applicants that are programs – entities operating within larger organizations or institutions – should define the scope of the legal services delivery for which funding

is sought. When responding to questions about service delivery and organizational capacity, the applicant should focus primarily on matters within the scope of the program defined by the applicant.

Applications from Partnerships/Joint Applications

LTF encourages partnerships between legal aid providers and trusted intermediary organizations (e.g., faith communities, social service agencies, community groups, health care providers) that help legal aid services reach individuals who are not aware of their legal options, who do not trust the legal system, or who are otherwise disconnected from pursuing solutions through the legal system. Accordingly, LTF will consider grant requests to support the delivery of services through these types of partnerships. To be consistent with the grant guidelines, however, LTF's funding for joint or partnership initiatives (1) must support the provision of legal services and (2) must be granted to an organization that provides legal aid services. Grant applications for joint/partnership initiatives should come from the partner organization that is responsible for providing legal services. Any grant funds awarded by LTF will be paid to the legal aid partner and will be designated to support legal services.

For information about seeking a CY 2026 grant to support a joint or partnership initiative, contact David Holtermann (312-938-3076 or david@ltf.org).

Requesting a Waiver of the One-Attorney Requirement

LTF's grantmaking focuses on organizations and programs that use attorneys to deliver and/or supervise the delivery of legal services. Consistent with this approach, LTF requires applicants to employ at least one (1) paid, full-time equivalent staff attorney who has been licensed to practice for a minimum of three years at the time the annual grant application is due.

In 2021, LTF updated its application process to give emerging organizations and/or legal aid programs based in under-resourced communities the opportunity to request a temporary, one-year waiver of this requirement. This update was based on the recognition that such organizations or programs – many of which reach under-served populations, address unmet needs, and/or offer new ways of helping people solve legal problems – may not be able to meet this eligibility requirement.

The LTF Board of Directors may, at its discretion, grant a temporary, one-year waiver of the one attorney requirement for emerging organizations or legal aid programs based in under-resourced communities.

If granted, a waiver would enable LTF to consider making a CY 2026 grant to an organization that: (1) does not have an attorney on staff; (2) employs an attorney who does not meet the experience requirement; or (3) employs an attorney who works on a less than full-time basis at the time of application submission. (**Please note:** *If your organization is a CY 2025 grantee of LTF and does not expect to meet the one-attorney requirement as of the CY 2026 application due date, you must contact David Holtermann, Deputy Executive Director of Grants & Legal Affairs before proceeding. Contact David at 312-938-3076 or david@ltf.org.*)

Applicants that are granted a waiver and ultimately receive an annual grant from LTF will be expected to have attorney staffing that meets the one-attorney requirement by the time the

application for subsequent annual funding is due. (For example, by September 2026 for applications for CY 2027 funding.) Applicants seeking a waiver will be asked to describe their plan for meeting the one-attorney requirement within that time frame. For applicants that propose to meet the one-attorney requirement by establishing and filling a new attorney position, LTF will not be the sole funder of that new position. Applicants should identify other funding sources (in addition to LTF) they intend to rely on to meet the one-attorney requirement within that time frame.

There are two ways an applicant can seek a waiver:

- 1) Submit a **Pre-application Waiver Request** by **August 15, 2025**.
 - Potential applicants can request a waiver by completing the Pre-Application Waiver Request application that is available on the application portal.
 - LTF will respond to timely waiver requests with a decision no later than **August 29, 2025**
 - Potential applicants will know their waiver status before deciding whether to submit a complete grant application by the **September 15** deadline.
- 2) Request a waiver **concurrently** with the submission of a complete application for CY 2026 funding by the **September 15, 2025**, deadline.
 - Any applicant seeking a waiver after August 15 should contact David Holtermann (312-938-3076 or david@ltf.org) to request access to the Concurrent Waiver Request application.
 - LTF will consider this request in its review of the complete application. However, the LTF Board may, in its discretion, ultimately decline to grant the waiver and/or decline funding for the applicant.

Regardless of which method an applicant uses to seek a waiver of the one-attorney requirement, waiver decisions will be granted based on multiple factors and will be made at the sole discretion of the LTF board of directors. **Please note that a decision to grant an applicant's waiver request at any point does not guarantee that the applicant will receive annual grant funding.**

In assessing emerging organizations and programs seeking a waiver, LTF will consider characteristics including but not limited to the organization or program's revenues and budget; staff size; longevity; and sources of institutional support. The LTF board will make waiver determinations based on the complete circumstances presented in the applicant's request.