



Supreme Court of Illinois

April 14, 2026

ILLINOIS SUPREME COURT AMENDS RULES TO ADDRESS LEGAL DESERTS

Chief Justice P. Scott Neville, Jr. and the Illinois Supreme Court announced today amendments to several Supreme Court Rules to address unmet legal needs in the state.

“Legal deserts”, a term commonly used to describe areas where there are a limited number of practicing attorneys, have cropped up across the country in largely rural areas. This has led to a lack of access to legal help that is effective, affordable, and responsive to the needs of people in these areas, including parts of Illinois. Of the 8,327 Illinois resident attorneys admitted to practice between 2020 and 2024, 7,625 (91.6%) are practicing in Cook County or the nearby counties of Lake, McHenry, Kane, DuPage, Kendall, Grundy, Will, and Kankakee. As a result, many legal offices have trouble recruiting and retaining attorneys. The amended rules are intended to help address both civil and criminal legal needs.

“Our legal system relies on trained advocates and we continue to see a growing number of litigants coming to court without attorneys,” Chief Justice Neville said. “The Illinois Supreme Court is well aware of this issue and will continue to take steps to address it.”

Supreme Court Rule 711 presently allows law students who have completed at least half of the required law school credits as well as law graduates who register for, take, and pass the first Illinois bar exam offered after graduation to obtain a temporary license to practice law under the supervision of an Illinois-licensed attorney at a legal aid organization, clinic, or government office.

“Too many Illinoisans do not have access to lawyers to help them with every day legal needs such as housing, debt relief or family issues,” said Attorney J. Timothy Eaton, who serves as Chair of the Executive Committee on the Practice of Law (Executive Committee). “These rule changes made by our Illinois Supreme Court provide for both additional and creative ways to make available legal assistance in “legal deserts” where affordable and immediate legal help is now unavailable to many.”

The amendments to Rule 711 will extend the length of time a law graduate may qualify for a 711 license following graduation from law school by allowing a law graduate who does not pass the first bar examination administered following graduation to retain their 711 license through the next administered bar examination. Allowing these law graduates to retain their 711 licenses through the second bar exam will help legal aid and public defender offices to meet the needs of their clients and support the professional development of these law graduates. The amendments will also allow a law graduate to sit for either the Illinois bar examination or the Uniform Bar

Examination in another jurisdiction, making it easier for law graduates to qualify for a 711 license.

On a pilot basis, 711 licenses will additionally be expanded to law graduates affiliated with a private firm and practicing in the First, Thirteenth, Fifteenth or Twenty-third Judicial Circuits. This expansion is intended to encourage recent graduates to pursue employment in legal deserts and get hired sooner.

The amendments to Rule 711 are effective January 1, 2027.

Additional amendments intended to address the issue of legal deserts have been made to Rules 705, 717, 793, and 795.

Supreme Court Rule 717 allows out-of-state attorneys to obtain a limited license to work for a legal aid or public defender program. The amendment to Rule 717 will remove the current 18-month time limit for practice under the Rule, and allow practice under the Rule to count toward the practice requirements for admission on motion under Rule 705 (which is amended as a result of the change to Rule 717).

The amendments to Rules 717 and 705 are effective July 15, 2026.

Supreme Court Rule 793(c)(1) requires that newly admitted attorneys complete an accredited Basic Skills Course of no less than six hours. The six-hour Basic Skills Course requirement can also be satisfied through participation in a mentoring program approved by the Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism pursuant to Rule 795(d)(11).

The amendments to Rules 793 and 795 will now require that attorneys admitted on or after January 1, 2028 complete a Basic Skills Course or an approved mentoring program that includes at least 0.5 hours of instruction on topics related to unmet legal needs, pro bono, limited scope representation, or other access to justice topics. This new requirement is designed to educate new attorneys about the extent of unmet legal needs across Illinois and understand steps they can take to help address these needs.

The amendments to Rules 793 and 795 are effective October 1, 2026.

The amended Illinois Supreme Court Rules can be found [here](#).

The amended rules were proposed by the Executive Committee and the Illinois Judicial Conference (IJC) as part of the IJC's initiative to increase access to legal services in legal deserts. The Executive Committee was formed in 2023 to make recommendations on issues impacting the practice of law and unmet legal needs in Illinois. The IJC is a 29-member body charged with strategic planning for the Illinois Judicial Branch. The Chief Justice serves as chair. The 2026-2028 Judicial Branch Strategic Agenda is available [here](#).

(FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT: James Brunner, Public Information Officer of the Illinois Supreme Court at 217.208.3354 or jbrunner@illinoiscourts.gov.)