

Date of Hearing: June 30, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
Ash Kalra, Chair
SB 1129 (Caballero) – As Amended June 23, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 37-0

SUBJECT: STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA: COMMUNITY JUSTICE WORKER PROGRAM

SYNOPSIS

California's "justice gap," or the lack of many Californians' ability to afford basic legal representation in the civil justice system, has been a persistent problem for California's justice system. Both the State Bar's 2019 and 2024 Justice Gap Services noted that nearly four out of five Californians faced a legal challenge for which they could not obtain legal counsel. Despite the state and other partners spending hundreds of millions of dollars this decade on funding for legal aid, with most private attorneys costing nearly \$500 per hour for services, access to justice is a major problem for everyday Californians.

One model for addressing the justice gap, adopted by at least a half dozen other states, is a Community Justice Worker model. The model uses non-attorneys with specialized training, operating under the supervision of legal aid organizations, to provide specialized legal services to lower income individuals. The model permits non-attorneys to handle some routine matters while saving attorneys' time for more complex matters. The goal is to make legal organizations more efficient and thus less expensive. The State Supreme Court recently responded positively to a proposal to implement a Community Justice Worker model in California but sent the proposal to the State Bar for review and public comment. This bill would require the State Bar, at the conclusion of the public comment period, to submit to the Legislature a report outlining any statutory changes needed to implement the final proposal. These proposals could then be adopted as a part of the 2027 State Bar fee bill.

This bill is supported by over a dozen of California's legal aid organizations who highlight Community Justice Worker programs success in other states and the need to address the justice gap in California. This non-controversial measure has no known opposition.

SUMMARY: Requires the State Bar to transmit to the Assembly and Senate Committees on Judiciary a report specifying any statutory changes the State Bar believes are necessary to implement the California Community Justice Worker Program. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires, after the State Bar solicits public comment on the Proposed California Rules of Court Rule 9.45.1 to Establish a Community Justice Worker program, as required by Administrative Order 2026-06-17-01 of the Supreme Court of California, the State Bar to at the time it resubmits the proposal to the Supreme Court of California, transmit to the Assembly and Senate Committees on Judiciary a report specifying any statutory changes the State Bar believes are necessary to implement the California Community Justice Worker Program.
- 2) Requires the report to conform to provisions of existing law.

- 3) Adopts a sunset date of January 1, 2031.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires all attorneys who practice law in California to be licensees of the State Bar and establishes the State Bar for the purpose of regulating the legal profession. Pursuant to the State Bar Act, requires the annual mandatory membership fee set by the Board to pay for discipline and other functions to be ratified by the Legislature. (Business and Professions Code Section 6000 *et seq.*)
- 2) Establishes that protection of the public, which includes support for greater access to, and inclusion in, the legal system, is the highest priority for the State Bar in exercising their licensing, regulatory, and disciplinary functions. (Business and Professions Code Section 6001.1.)
- 3) States that it has been the tradition of those learned in the law and licensed to practice law in this state to provide voluntary pro bono legal services to those who cannot afford the help of a lawyer, and that every lawyer authorized and privileged to practice law in California is expected to make a contribution. (Business and Professions Code Section 6073.)
- 4) Finds that due to insufficient funding, existing programs providing free legal services in civil matters to indigent persons, especially underserved client groups, such as the elderly, the disabled, juveniles, and non-English-speaking persons, do not adequately meet the needs of these persons, the Legislature seeks to expand the availability and improve the quality of existing free legal services in civil matters to indigent persons, and to initiate new programs that will provide services to them. (Business and Professions Code Section 6210.)
- 5) Creates, within the State Bar, a Legal Services Trust Fund Commission to administer IOLTA accounts, Equal Access Funds, or similar funds or grant moneys intended for the support of qualified legal services projects and qualified support centers, as specified. (Business and Professions Code Section 6210.5 (a).)

FISCAL EFFECT: As currently in print this bill is keyed non-fiscal.

COMMENTS: According to a 2015 survey by the National Center for State Courts, in 75 percent of all civil cases at least one party is self-represented and lacking official legal counsel. (Paula Hannaford-Agor, et al., *Civil Justice Initiative: The Landscape of Civil Litigation in State Courts*, National Center for State Courts (2015) available at: <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/2390/>.) Although these findings are more than a decade old, the State Bar's own 2024 Justice Gap Study found that although 73 percent of California households face potential civil legal matters only 18 percent of Californians seek legal counsel. (2024 Justice 2024 California Justice Gap Study, at pp. 14 & 20, available at: <https://publications.calbar.ca.gov/justice-gap-study/>.)

Seeking to close the justice gap, late last year the Legal Aid Association of California (LAAC) petitioned the California Supreme Court to authorize a Community Justice Worker Program in the state. (Pet. for the Cal. Supreme Court to Review and Approve Proposed Cal. Rule of Court 9.45.1 to Establish a Cal. Community Justice Worker Program, (Dec. 8, 2025), Case No. S294332, available at <https://tf3.truefiling.com/openfiling/81e25e55-6adf-4d5d-4c54-08de38777cd4/recipient/2238b01a-c217-44e0-eb69-08de38777d5f/download>.) Two weeks ago,

on June 17, 2026, the California Supreme Court transmitted a revised version of the program to the State Bar in order to enable the State Bar to solicit public comment and send the final proposal to the Supreme Court for approval. (Cal. Supreme Court ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER 2026-06-17-01.)

This bill would direct the State Bar to alert the Legislature if any statutory changes are needed to implement the final recommendation. In support of the bill the author states:

California faces a persistent and well-documented access-to-justice crisis. Millions of Californians experience civil legal problems each year involving housing instability, consumer debt, domestic violence, public benefits, and employment. Yet, the vast majority have no access to legal assistance. This is particularly true for individuals in rural areas who lack access to attorneys, and people who cannot afford to pay attorney's fees or take time off work to attend court appearances. This power imbalance forces individuals & families into a system of inequality that favors the wealthy and powerful.

Other states have attempted to address the issue of inequitable access to justice through a Community Justice Worker Model. Community Justice Workers (CJWs) are legal aid assistants who may, under the supervision of a legal services organization, provide limited and free legal services. Services provided by CJWs include legal advice regarding unlawful detainer complaints, consumer debt collection, and wage and hour employment claims. Several states have adopted similar models, including Alaska, Arizona, Utah and Delaware, which have expanded access to legal assistance to meet the needs of their courts and residents. To explore the solution of a Community Justice Worker Model as one answer to California's access to justice gap and build off a recent California Supreme Court ruling, SB 1129 would require the State Bar to transmit to the Legislature any statutory changes necessary to support a Community Justice Worker Program.

The urgent need for more affordable legal services in California. In order to practice law in California, one must be licensed as an attorney and conducting the "practice of law" without a license is unlawful. (Business & Professions Code Section 6126.) Because the overwhelming majority of those practicing law in California attended law school, many lawyers incurred significant debt to obtain the right to practice. As such, by and large, attorneys are expensive. According to the legal services firm Cilo, in 2025, the average attorney practicing in California charged \$422 per hour for the provision of legal services. (<https://www.clio.com/resources/legal-trends/compare-lawyer-rates/ca/>.) Given that one would have to pay the average attorney more than \$1,500 before lunch, it is not surprising that most Californians cannot afford an attorney.

In the absence of the ability to afford an attorney outright, most Californians seek legal services on a contingency basis, whereby the attorney only collects their fees from a final verdict or settlement. Not only has the contingency fee model faced significant, and largely unfair, scrutiny in recent years, (Rebecca Ellis, *Uber — a target of car crash lawsuits — pushes for law to limit California lawyer fees*, Los Angeles Times (Jan. 17, 2026) available at: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2026-01-17/uber-personal-injury-lawsuits-california-law>), the model only works when a client can obtain a sizable recovery or virtually-guaranteed attorney's fees and costs at the resolution of a matter. Given that many disputes, ranging from marital dissolutions to unlawful detainer actions, do not have large paydays at the end of the matter, too many Californians must navigate the civil justice system without representation.

Indeed, statistical evidence shows that many Californians go without legal representation. The State Bar's 2024 Justice Gap noted Californians' inability to afford legal services is, "widespread, pervasive, and multifaceted, characterized by two dimensions: a gap in knowledge about how to access legal help and a gap in service—namely that California's legal services delivery system cannot meet the legal needs of Californians." (Cal. State Bar, 2024 California Justice Gap Study, at p. 7, available at <https://publications.calbar.ca.gov/justice-gap-study/>.) Trying to plug this hole the Legal Services Trust Fund Commission has awarded at least \$628 million in grants to legal aid organizations since 2020. (Cal. State Bar, *Strengthening Legal Aid: Five Years of Strategic Investment*, available at <https://www.calbar.ca.gov/sites/default/files/portals/0/documents/reports/2020-2024-LSTFC-Impact-Report.pdf>.) Although these investments are supplemented by federal and local funds, as well as private donations, the justice gap persists.

The Community Justice Worker model provides one potential pathway to closing the justice gap. One potential model for addressing the justice gap is the Community Justice Worker model. Presently, states including Delaware, Hawaii, and Texas have all adopted some form of the model. These workers are non-attorneys who receive specialized training to provide limited legal services under the supervision of a legal services organization. In order to avoid facing a potential charge for the unauthorized practice of law, the states that operate these programs have either modified the statutory requirements for the practice of law, in the circumstance of a justice worker, or adopted court rules authorizing the program. The establishment of a Community Justice Worker Program in California would require similar updates to the existing law framework for practicing law.

To that end, in December 2025, several legal aid organizations under the leadership of LAAC petitioned the California Supreme Court to adopt a Community Justice Worker Program. Just this month, on June 17, the Court largely approved LAAC's petition and programmatic framework but sent the modified proposal to the State Bar to receive formal public comment on the program. (Cal. Supreme Court ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER 2026-06-17-01.) The comment period should close later this year.

This bill would enable the Legislature to enact the Community Justice Worker Program if statutory changes are necessary. Although the Supreme Court transmitted a comprehensive framework to the State Bar for public review and comment, the proposal may be modified as a result of the public's input. Accordingly, after conversations between the author and Committee staff, the decision was made to keep the program out of statute at this time. This decision was twofold: codification of the program may be unnecessary and any changes stemming from public comment would require an urgency measure next year to address potential discrepancies.

Nonetheless, legislation may be needed to fully implement the Community Justice Worker Program, particularly to capture changes to the rules governing the unauthorized practice of law. Accordingly, this bill directs the State Bar to report to both this Committee and the Senate Committee on Judiciary any statutory changes that may be needed to implement the Community Justice Program as the program stands after public input. The bill requires this report to be sent to the Legislature at the same time the final proposal is transmitted to the Supreme Court. This bill would ensure that the Legislature's Judiciary Committees possess the outline of any statutory changes to implement the Community Justice Program such that these changes can easily be incorporated into the 2027 bill reauthorizing the State Bar to impose fees on attorneys.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: This bill is supported by dozens of legal aid organizations from across California. In support of the bill, the Legal Aid Association of California writes:

Our community of legal aid organizations serves hundreds of thousands of clients every year, and yet we still cannot meet the full needs of our community. The community justice worker model represents a practical and necessary evolution in how we deliver legal services, particularly for communities that have long been underserved by the traditional legal system. By allowing trained nonlawyers to provide limited legal assistance under the supervision of licensed attorneys, this approach expands the reach of legal help without compromising quality or ethical standards. States like Alaska have demonstrated that with the right training, oversight, and structure, community-based advocates can effectively help people navigate complex legal issues, from housing to family law, in ways that are culturally competent and accessible. Additionally, we hope a model in California will limit participation to only those community justice workers who partner directly with a legal aid organization, ensuring that there is an additional public protection and that no individual will be charged for these services.

At a time when the gap between legal needs and available services continues to widen, this model offers a thoughtful and scalable solution. Many individuals facing critical legal problems never receive any legal assistance at all. Many individuals are afraid to go to an attorney, do not know that their problem has a legal solution, or simply do not think they can access help for free. Community justice workers can meet people where they are, often within trusted community-based nonprofits, and provide legal help that may prevent crises from escalating. Importantly, legal aid attorney supervision ensures that these services rely on current law and best practices.

Adopting a community justice worker model is not about replacing lawyers, but about strengthening the impact of legal aid. It recognizes that meaningful access to justice requires a range of approaches and providers working together. By embracing this model, jurisdictions can take a significant step toward a more equitable legal system, especially in rural regions of California, where access to a legal aid attorney is more difficult.

This bill will eventually help close the justice gap by increasing available legal helpers throughout our state, and we hope that funding will be made available to help us adopt this model.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Asian Law Alliance
Bet Tzedek
California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.
Center for Access to Qdros
Center for Gender and Refugee Studies-California
Central California Legal Services
Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations
Community Legal Aid SoCal
Contra Costa Senior Legal Services
Disability Rights California

Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Inland Counties Legal Services INC.
Law Foundation of Silicon Valley
Legal Aid Association of California
Legal Aid At Work
Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
Legal Aid Society of San Bernardino
Legal Aid Society of San Diego
Legal Link
Legal Services for Prisoners With Children
Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County
Oasis Legal Services
Onejustice
Wage Justice Center
Youth Law Center

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Nicholas Liedtke / JUD. / (916) 319-2334