



HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES

STATE OF MICHIGAN

Appropriations Requests for Legislatively Directed Spending Items

1. The sponsoring representative's first name:
Rachelle
2. The sponsoring representative's last name:
Smit
3. The cosponsoring representatives' names. All cosponsors must be listed. If none, please type 'n/a.' A signed letter from the sponsor approving the co-sponsorship and a signed letter from the member wishing to co-sponsor are required. Attach letters at question #9 below.
N/A
4. Name of the entity that the spending item is intended for:
Allegan County Legal Assistance Center
5. Physical address of the entity that the spending item is intended for:
113 Chestnut Street Allegan, MI 49010
6. If there is not a specific recipient, the intended location of the project or activity:
N/A
7. Name of the representative and the district number where the legislatively directed spending item is located:
Rep. Rachelle Smit, District # 43
8. Purpose of the legislatively directed spending item. Please include how it provides a public benefit and why it is an appropriate use of taxpayer funding. Please also demonstrate that the item does not violate Article IV, S 30 of the Michigan Constitution. Allegan County Legal Assistance Center (ACLAC) was founded to assist patrons who need legal assistance to effectively represent themselves with civil matters in the Allegan County courts. Since opening on July 31, 2012, ACLAC staff, volunteers, and interns have assisted over 32,000 patrons. Assistance is available at the ACLAC office, by phone, and by Zoom.

ACLAC provides and supports committed staff and volunteers to educate litigants on

appropriate legal processes and procedures, while offering access to proper tools and assistance with paperwork. ACLAC provides tools, resources, and information to aid in competent self-representation in Allegan County civil court matters. The most commonly requested services include: civil forms and assistance with completion; community resource information; attorney referral lists for those needing legal advice; copies and divorce packets; computer and printer access.

This legal assistance also benefits the courts by having all documents in order and facilitating efficient resolution of civil legal matters.

9. Attach documents here if needed:

Attachments added to the end of this file.

10. The amount of state funding requested for the legislatively directed spending item.

50000

11. Has the legislatively directed spending item previously received any of the following types of funding? Check all that apply.

["State"]

12. Please select one of the following groups that describes the entity requesting the legislatively directed spending item:

Non-profit organization

13. For a non-profit organization, has the organization been operating within Michigan for the preceding 36 months?

Yes

14. For a non-profit organization, has the entity had a physical office within Michigan for the preceding 12 months?

Yes

15. For a non-profit organization, does the organization have a board of directors?

Yes

16. For a non-profit organization, list all the active members on the organization's board of directors and any other officers. If this question is not applicable, please type 'n/a.'

Dan Borton, Vice Presiden; Margaret Bakker, Secretary; Sandra Piwnicki Kern; Bart Shaw, Director; Frank Baker, Director; Jennifer Brink, Director; Alison Sackley, Director; Jenann Pearson, Director; Preston Pietszak, Director; Jeffrey Burns, Director; Melissa Marks, Director

17. "I certify that neither the sponsoring representative nor the sponsoring representative's staff or immediate family has a direct or indirect pecuniary interest in the legislatively directed spending item."

Yes, this is correct

18. Anticipated start and end dates for the legislatively directed spending item:

10.1.2025 – 9.30.2026

19. "I hereby certify that all information provided in this request is true and accurate."

Yes



Allegan County Legal Assistance CENTER

"Helping Others Help Themselves"

A Michigan 501(c) (3) Non-profit Corporation
Allegan County Courthouse, Lower Level
113 Chestnut Street - Allegan, MI 49010

Phone: (269) 686-5221
Email: alleganlac@gmail.com

Allegan County Legal Assistance Center Board of Directors 2025

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dan Borton, JD <i>Vice-chairperson</i>	Dan Borton, Vice President, Member of Fund Development Committee Managing Director of West Michigan Legal Aide
Hon. Margaret Bakker <i>Secretary</i>	Margaret Bakker, Secretary, Member of the Finance Committee 48 th Circuit Court Judge
Sandra Piwnicki Kern <i>Treasurer</i>	Sandra Piwnicki Kern, Treasurer, Chairperson, Finance Committee Retired
Bart Shaw	Bart Shaw, Director Retired
Sheriff Frank Baker	Frank Baker, Director Allegan County Sheriff (elected)
Jennifer Brink, JD	Jennifer Brink, Director, Member of Human Resources Committee 48 th Circuit Court Administrator
Alison Sackley	Alison Sackley, Director, Chairperson of Human Resources Committee Retired
Jenann Pearson	Jenann Pearson, Director Gun Plain Township Trustee - (elected)
Preston Pietszak, JD	Preston Pietszak, Director Referee for Friend of the Court 48 th Circuit Court
Jeffrey Burns, CPA	Jeffrey Burns, Director CPA
Melissa Marks	Melissa Marks, Director Human Resources Consultant.

Allegan County Legal Assistance Center was established as a Michigan Legal Help Program in 2012
Michigan Legal Help Web Site: www.allegan.michiganlegalhelp.org. Also supported by private
donations, fundraising efforts, and by:



The History of the Allegan County Legal Assistance Center

The Allegan County Legal Assistance Center (ACLAC) opened its doors to the public on July 31, 2012 and in the following 13 years, has assisted over 32,908 patrons. The staff at ACLAC assist self-represented litigants with appropriate court processes and procedures, offer access to necessary tools/resources, and assist with the accurate completion of forms, thereby more effectively accomplishing justice for all.

In 2011, Judge Margaret Bakker started her judgeship with the Allegan County Circuit Court. At this time, the county was experiencing a significant increase in the number of people needing to represent themselves in non-criminal matters, especially in domestic relations cases. Judge Bakker learned that both Kent and Ottawa Counties had established self-help legal assistance centers and in her new role as Judge saw a real need for something similar in Allegan County, as she was witnessing firsthand how challenging it was for those people representing themselves to navigate through the processes and paperwork in the court system. These challenges were causing delays in cases and increased the workload in the courts, as litigants were forced to redo and resubmit forms with nowhere to turn for assistance. In 2011, Judge Bakker successfully managed to get a self-help legal assistance center started together with the Community Safety Group, Bart Shaw, a local business leader, and Professor Nelson Miller, who leveraged the Grand Rapids Cooley Law School Pro Bono group, to help establish ACLAC as a Non-Profit Organization. The much-needed self-help center became a reality and with a ribbon cutting ceremony at the courthouse, ACLAC was officially launched.

Shelley Kengis was ACLAC's first part-time Program Navigator, bringing with her experience as a Victim Advocate at Sylvia's Place and the Kalamazoo Drug court. A grant of \$5,000 was provided to pay for staffing the center as part of a Self-Help Pilot Project coming out of a 'Solutions on Self-Help' Task force.

The year 1 budget for ACLAC was \$4,639. Allegan County generously provided ACLAC with a small meeting room and a printer on the lower level of the courthouse and this is where patrons started to be directed when they arrived at the courthouse in need of legal assistance. ACLAC has since moved to a slightly larger space in the courthouse law library.

In May 2013, Chris Jokinen took over from Shelley as the ACLAC Program Navigator. Subsequently, the title was changed from Program Navigator to Director and over time, sufficient funds were raised to enable the center to add a part-time Associate Director and increase opening hours. Subsequent Directors and Associate Directors include Jamielynne Commissaris, Jessica Howell, Sheryl Willis, Nicole Back, Lyric Weingand, Rebecca Hale, Bonnie Riley, and Marty Curley. The current Director of Operations is Jennifer Raudenbush and the Director of Finance and Fundraising is Linda Teeter.

As the requirements of a 501(c)(3) non-profit dictate, a board of directors was established to provide the strategic framework for the center. In the early days, the board focused largely on fundraising to keep the new center operating. Regular fundraising events were executed and grant applications made to local businesses, foundations, and the United Way to enable payment of the part-time hourly paid staff. The center would not be able to operate effectively without additional help from interns and volunteers to support the two part-time staff members. Fundraising has been a continuous endeavor, in particular during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, but thanks to the significant efforts of the staff, current Director, board members, interns, and volunteers, the center has remained open and continued to serve patrons even by phone and email during the lockdown period. Outside of fundraising events and private donors, key financial contributors to the center have been the Allegan County United Way, the Mignon Sherwood DeLano Foundation, Allegan County Community Foundation, as well as a few of the Allegan County Municipal Townships. Most recently, a grant has been obtained from the State of Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, which has enabled the center to hire a fourth part-time staff member and open 5 days a week.

The Board of Directors currently consists of Vice President Dan Borton, Secretary Judge Margaret Bakker, Treasurer Sandra Kern, Bart Shaw, Sheriff Frank Baker, Jenn Brink, Alison Sackley, Jenann Pearson, Preston Pietszak, Jeffery Burns and Melissa Marks. Previous board members have included John Van Elk, Jim Hull, Dawn Sherman, Shaun Moskalik, Teresa Price, Avery Rose, Jamielynne Commissaris, and Bonnie Riley.

The paid and unpaid staff at the center are available to provide assistance to all Allegan County residents and if necessary, sift through their particular problems, sometimes providing information on a variety of resources available to them if they require additional help, and to assist them in identifying and executing the next steps in legal process if necessary.

What Type of Cases May ACLAC Assist?

- Divorce
- Friend of the Court Issues, such as custody, parenting time and child support
- Probate Court Issues, such as guardianships and deceased estates
- Small Claims, Garnishment
- Landlord/Tenant
- Expungement, License Restoration
- Adoption, Name Change, Emancipation
- Various Circuit Court Actions, such as motions and subpoenas
- PPO/PPO Termination
- Other (notary, copies, law library, hearing videos)



ACLAC was founded to assist patrons who need legal assistance to effectively represent themselves with civil matters in Allegan County courts. Since opening on July 31, 2012, ACLAC staff, volunteers, and interns have assisted over 32,000 patrons. Assistance is available at the ACLAC office, by phone, and by Zoom.

Michigan Legal Help

Helping Michigan residents solve their legal problems. Michigan Legal Help is an online platform which offers free legal information and tools for persons handling legal problems without an attorney. Information can be found at Allegan.MichiganLegalHelp.org.

Funding and Support

The Allegan County Legal Assistance Center is a 501(c)3, non-profit organization. Ongoing operating funds are generated through grants, donations and fundraising.

Most recently, ACLAC has received grants from Allegan County Community Foundation, Allegan County Women Who Care, Lakeshore Women Who Care, the Mignon Sherwood DeLano Foundation and the Allegan County Bar Association. Donations have also been received from Meijer and Wal-Mart.

What Does The Allegan County Legal Assistance Center (ACLAC) do?

ACLAC provides and supports committed staff and volunteers to educate litigants on appropriate legal processes and procedures, while also offering access to proper tools and assistance with paperwork, thereby more effectively accomplishing justice for all.

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Who Is Eligible For Assistance?

All Allegan County residents and persons with civil cases in Allegan County courts who wish to represent themselves in civil legal matters



Location

Allegan County Courthouse
113 Chestnut Street, Allegan MI 49010
(269) 686-5221

Office Hours

Monday 9:00 a.m.- 3:30 p.m. (last person assisted at 3:00 p.m.)
Tuesday - Thursday 9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. (last person assisted at 4:00 p.m.)
Friday 8:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. (last person assisted at 2:30 p.m.)
No Appointment Needed

How does ACLAC Help Its Patrons?

ACLAC provides tools, resources, and information to aid in competent self-representation in Allegan County civil court matters. The most commonly requested services include:

- Civil forms and assistance with completion
- Community resource information
- Attorney referral list for those needing legal advice
- Copies and divorce packets
- Computer and printer Access

All ACLAC services are free, but patrons may be charged a nominal fee for copying and printing.

ACLAC is staffed with part-time employees and volunteers who are not attorneys and do not provide legal advice or represent patrons in court. ACLAC does not assist with any criminal matter. Patrons with complicated issues may be referred to an attorney or another appropriate service provider.