



Justice Court Reform Task Force

2023 Annual Report | November 30, 2023

In the 2023 General Session, the Utah State Legislature created the [Justice Court Reform Task Force](#) in [H.B. 210](#) “Justice Court Changes” to review the state’s court system and make recommendations regarding justice courts. That bill also required the task force to provide a report, including any proposed legislation, to the Judiciary Interim Committee and the Legislative Management Committee on or before November 30 of each year that the task force is in effect. This document is intended to satisfy that reporting requirement.

Task Force Overview

The Justice Court Reform Task Force is a mixed committee composed of nine members—four legislators and five non-legislative appointees. Task force membership and staff are detailed in the table below:

2023 Justice Court Reform Task Force Membership		
Legislators	Stakeholders	LRGC Staff
Senator Kirk Cullimore (Chair)	Matt Dixon, Utah League of Cities and Towns	Jonathan Adams, Policy Analyst
Representative Nelson Abbott (Chair)	Eric Clarke, Utah Association of Counties	Jacqueline Carlton, Associate General Counsel
Senator Stephanie Pitcher	Tom Ross, Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice	Naomi Garrow, Administrative Assistant
Representative Doug Owens	Jim Peters, Utah State Courts	
	J. Eric Bunderson, Utah State Bar	

In accordance with Utah Code Section [36-29-112\(9\)](#), the Justice Court Reform Task Force shall review the state’s court system and make recommendations regarding:

- the structure and organization of the court system;
- appeals from the justice court to the district court;
- qualifications and requirements for justice court judges;
- the procedures and practices for small claims cases and infractions; and
- other changes related to justice courts.

2023 Interim Summary

The Justice Court Reform Task Force met four times throughout the 2023 Interim. The task force received a [staff presentation](#) on the task force’s duties, a [presentation](#) by the Utah State Courts on their findings and recommendations regarding justice court reform, and considered other stakeholder input.

Identified Issues

In the course of its study, the Justice Court Reform Task Force identified several issues with the current structure and operations of justice courts, including:



- the lack of meaningful appellate review of justice court decisions resulting from “de novo” appeals;¹
- limited access to indigent defense services and substance abuse and mental health treatment at the justice court level; and
- negative perceptions of justice courts related to the generation of local government revenue through fines and fees.

Proposed Legislation

To address these and other issues related to justice courts, the Justice Court Reform Task Force at its November 7, 2023, meeting voted unanimously to favorably recommend the following draft legislation to the Judiciary Interim Committee:

- **Joint Resolution Supporting Justice Court Reform**
This resolution expresses support for justice court reform, and specifically the Justice Court Reform Task Force’s proposal to bring cases from the justice court into the state court system. Further, the resolution expresses the Legislature’s intent to implement justice court reform in phases by piloting it in two counties (to be determined) beginning January 1, 2026, with full implementation statewide by January 1, 2031.
- **Justice Court Reform Task Force Sunset Extension**
This bill extends the sunset date for the Justice Court Reform Task Force from July 1, 2025 to December 31, 2026. The task force determined that this additional time was necessary to further study justice court reform and its phased implementation.

Judiciary Interim Committee Recommendation

Senator Kirk Cullimore, co-chair of the Justice Court Reform Task Force, presented the joint resolution and draft legislation to the Judiciary Interim Committee on November 15, 2023. The committee voted unanimously to recommend both as committee bills.

2024 Interim Plans

The Justice Court Reform Task Force plans to meet regularly throughout the 2024 Interim to further study justice court reform. Specifically, the task force plans to prepare 2025 General Session draft legislation to create a pilot program for justice court reform in two counties, among other technical changes.

¹ A “de novo” appeal is where the appellate court retries the entire case instead of reviewing the record of the lower court’s proceedings for legal errors. Appeals from justice courts are “de novo” because justice courts do not maintain permanent records of their legal proceedings.