

Washington Courts: News and Information

Supreme Court Approves Alternative Pathways to Lawyer Licensure in Washington State March 15, 2024

The Washington Supreme Court today [filed a pair of Supreme Court Orders](#) approving alternative pathways to law first time in state history that the lawyer admissions rules do not necessitate some form of bar exam to demonstrate licensure.

While a handful of U.S. states have begun exploring similar alternatives in recent years, Washington's Supreme Court officially approving alternatives to the bar exam.

A task force, studying options to the traditional bar exam was chartered in November 2020 by then-Chief Justice year of pandemic-related bar-exam modifications that caused many to question the efficacy of the current exam.

The [Bar Licensure Task Force](#) is chaired by Washington Supreme Court Justice Raquel Montoya-Lewis and Seattle Anthony Varona.

After more than three years of extensive study—bringing together data and research with testimony from scholars came to two important findings: The traditional bar exam disproportionately and unnecessarily blocks marginalized practice of law, and the traditional bar exam is at best minimally effective for ensuring competent lawyers.

The main objective of the court's admissions rules is public protection, with recommendations focusing lawyer admission world practice and skills while reducing historical barriers to the profession.

"I would like to thank my co-chair Dean Varona and all the members of the Task Force that worked so hard over this new path forward for Washington," said Justice Montoya-Lewis. "These recommendations come from a diverse public practice, academics, and researchers who contributed immense insight, counterpoints and research to get

"With these alternative pathways, we recognize that there are multiple ways to ensure a competent, licensed body desperately needed around the state," she continued.

"I am delighted but not surprised that the Washington Supreme Court has adopted the Task Force's recommendations Washington to have a Supreme Court that time after time has used innovative approaches to correct injustice and services to meet the needs of the underserved and marginalized," said Seattle University School of Law Dean Ant

"The Court's decisions in adopting the NextGen Bar Exam, a revised cut score, and the alternate pathways to licensure allow law school graduates a choice of modalities to demonstrate their competency, and will immediately help admit licensed attorneys in broad swaths of the state, I thank the Court for adopting our recommendations, the Washington endorsing them, Justice Montoya-Lewis for serving as an excellent Co-Chair, and all of the members of our Task Force and hard for so long. This was a multiyear effort and we are delighted by the outcome," he said.

The Court's orders implement these changes:

- Adopt the [National Conference of Bar Examiners' NextGen bar exam](#), which addresses many of the identified by focusing on real-world skills and practice. The NextGen bar exam will be implemented in Washington in
- Create three experiential-learning alternatives to the bar exam, one for law-school graduates, one for law-school APR 6 law clerks (who are enrolled in a non-law school course of study).

- For graduates, this would entail a six-month apprenticeship under the guidance and supervision of a qualified attorney; the graduates would be required to complete three courses of standardized coursework.
- For law students, the experiential pathway would allow them to graduate practice-ready by completing 1200 hours of work as a licensed legal intern; they would be required to submit a portfolio of this work to waive the bar exam.
- For law clerks (enrolled in a non-law school course of study), creation of additional standardized education requirements to be completed under the guidance of their tutors that dovetail with the requirements of the law school graduation requirements; hours of work as a licensed legal intern to be eligible to waive the bar exam.
- Call for the investigation and adoption of assessments and programs to help ensure lawyers remain competent not just upon the moment of licensure.
- Reduce the experience requirement for out-of-state licensed attorneys from three to one year to be eligible via admission by motion.
- Reduce the bar exam minimum passing score from 270 to 266 (the score adopted during the pandemic).

The Court will partner with the [Washington State Bar Association](#), its regulatory agency, to create a plan and implementation strategy that likely include outreach and partnership with many stakeholders, to develop/amend relevant Court rules and administrative procedures.

The Bar Licensure Task Force also looked at the Character and Fitness process for lawyer licensure. The Court expects to act on those recommendations in April.

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