



Fact Sheet

Summary of Programs for Self-Represented Litigants

California courts are facing an ever-increasing number of litigants who go to court without legal counsel largely because they cannot afford representation. Self-represented litigants are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms as well as with their rights and obligations, which leaves them disadvantaged in court and consumes significant court resources. Accordingly, the Judicial Council has made creating greater access to the courts for self-represented litigants one of its top priorities. The council is directly involved with the following programs and services.

Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants

In May 2001, the Judicial Council established the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants to coordinate the statewide response to the needs of litigants who are representing themselves. The task force will develop a statewide action plan on serving self-represented litigants and review plans submitted by local courts to establish more programs and services for self-represented litigants.

Web Site

In July 2001 the Judicial Council launched its comprehensive online Self-Help Center for court users who do not have attorneys. This new link to the courts for self-represented litigants and others wishing to be better informed about the law and various court procedures helps achieve the council's goal of ensuring meaningful court access for all Californians. The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the council's staff agency, maintains the center at: www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp. The Web site is designed to help those without attorneys more successfully navigate the court system and acquire realistic expectations about the legal system. Although a wealth of legal information and resources is provided, this site does not interpret the law, predict results, or provide legal advice on individual cases. (See companion fact sheet, *Online Self-Help Center Q&A*.)

Family Law Facilitators

Effective January 1, 1997, Family Code section 10002 established an Office of the Family Law Facilitator in all 58 counties (Assem. Bill 1058; Stats. 1996, ch. 957). The

Judicial Council administers the program, providing nearly \$11 million per year to court-based offices staffed by licensed attorneys. Facilitators working for the superior court guide litigants through procedures involving child support, maintenance of health insurance, and spousal support. Assistance includes cases involving the local child support agency, of which many are public assistance reimbursement cases. Many courts also have enlisted volunteer attorneys or provide additional funding to assist self-represented litigants in other family law areas, including dissolution, custody and visitation. Family law facilitators are able to assist opposing parties with forms completion, explanation of court procedures, and preparation of support calculations, and they provide workshops and referrals to community agencies that assist parents and families. Statewide, facilitators help over 30,000 self-represented litigants each month.

Equal Access Fund

The Judicial Council is working in partnership with the State Bar's Legal Services Trust Fund to establish self-help centers in California courts. To that end, the council and the bar are distributing nearly \$1 million to legal services programs throughout the state each year for court-based services for low-income self-represented litigants. So far, 15 programs assist 17 courts throughout the state in cases involving domestic violence, guardianships, family law, landlord/tenant, and general civil assistance.

Family Law Information Centers

Effective January 1, 1998, Family Code section 15010 established a Family Law Information Center (Assem. Bill 2207; Stats. 1998, ch. 9721). The Judicial Council administers three pilot project centers in the Superior Courts of Los Angeles, Sutter, and Fresno Counties. The centers are supervised by attorneys and assist low-income self-represented litigants with forms, information, and resources concerning dissolution, separation, parentage, child and spousal support, property division, custody, and visitation. Center staff work closely with the family law facilitators in these three counties to coordinate services.

Pro Per Information Centers

In 1997 the trial courts of Alameda, Sacramento, San Diego, Santa Clara, and Ventura Counties each received \$25,000 from the Judicial Council to develop model pro per centers. Various approaches are being tested. The San Diego County court collaborated with its local Family Law Facilitator to develop and distribute statewide a four-part video series that guides self-represented litigants through court procedures and forms preparation; Ventura County added a mobile office in its jurisdiction; and Santa Clara County developed Web site materials.

Videos

The Administrative Office of the Courts offers several videos to help the estimated 94,500 self-represented litigants involved in custody mediation each year learn more about family court procedures. The award-winning *Focus on the Child* orients self-represented parents to court procedures, mediation, child custody evaluation, effective presentation of child-related information to the courts, parenting plans, and supervised visitation. The AOC has also developed videos on how to prepare court forms for an

uncontested divorce, how to request a domestic violence restraining order, and how to respond to a request for a domestic violence restraining order. These videos are available in English and Spanish and come with written guides to accompany the video.

Judicial Mediation and Arbitration

The options of judicial mediation and arbitration, including those stipulated by Code of Civil Procedure section 1141 et seq., offer less formal and less adversarial settings in which self-represented litigants often can settle their disputes.

Additional Self-Represented Litigant Informational Publications

- *You Don't Have to Sue*: The Judicial Council, in conjunction with the State Bar, offers this pamphlet about alternative dispute resolution options for distribution by the courts.
- *Domestic Violence Restraining Orders Instruction Booklet, Form DV-150*: Gives victims comprehensive guidance through completion of restraining order requests.
- *Summary Dissolution Handbook*: Provides detailed instructions on how to complete forms for a summary dissolution and how to write a marital settlement agreement for cases involving a summary dissolution.

Education and Training

Enabling court staff to effectively assist self-represented litigants is also key to the Judicial Council's mission in making the courts more accessible.

- In the spring of 2001, the council also sponsored four regional conferences to allow courts to discuss different models for providing self-help services and determine how to best meet the needs of self-represented litigants in their community.
- The Center for Judicial Education and Research, the educational arm of the Judicial Council, addresses issues concerning self-represented litigants in many of its classes and seminars.
- The Administrative Office of the Courts sponsors an annual conference on domestic violence that informs and trains advocates, law enforcement officers, and judicial officers on updated assistance models.
- The council's Civil and Small Claims Advisory Committee has prepared a training videotape for small claims bench officers on fair and impartial adjudication of small claims cases, all of which proceed without attorney involvement. That committee is also developing a model program for recruiting, selecting and evaluating temporary judges for small claims court."