

**JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS**
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, California 94102-3688

Summary Report

TO: Members of the Judicial Council

FROM: Administrative Office of the Courts
Executive Office Programs Division
Pat Sweeten, Director, 415-865-7560

DATE: February 2, 2005

SUBJECT: Initial Report, Early Implementation of the JusticeCorps Program

Issue Statement

The Administrative Office of the Courts, in partnership with the Superior Court of Los Angeles County, has launched JusticeCorps, a new project designed to enhance assistance to the public in Los Angeles area self-help legal access centers.

Recommendation

Administrative Office of the Courts staff asks that the Judicial Council review the following program summary and attachments for its information only.

Rationale for Recommendation

Program summary

Funded in part through a \$250,000 per year three-year AmeriCorps grant, JusticeCorps is a collaborative project of the California Administrative Office of the Courts; the Superior Court of Los Angeles County; Los Angeles County Department of Consumer Affairs Small Claims Advisor; California State University at Northridge; California State University at Dominguez Hills; University of California at Los Angeles; California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles; Legal Aid Society of Orange County; and Neighborhood Legal Services.

In September and October of 2004, 100 JusticeCorps members were recruited from the four local universities listed above to provide assistance in 10 sites at Superior Court of Los Angeles County Self-Help Legal Access Centers, Family Law Information Centers, and with the Los Angeles County Department of Consumer Affairs Small Claims Advisor.

As part of the national AmeriCorps program structure, JusticeCorps members will:

- Make a 300 hour commitment to working in the centers during this academic year.

- Receive 50-60 hours of training to provide legal assistance through one-on-one direct contact with litigants, legal workshops, and computer terminals designed to assist litigants in completing forms.
- Receive a \$1,000 cash educational award to be applied toward their college expenses in exchange for their service

JusticeCorps students provide assistance to self represented litigants in several ways:

- By providing general assistance with directions, parking, center locations, hours of operation and schedules of workshops
- By providing referrals to other services as appropriate such as domestic violence services
- By helping to identify proper forms
- By helping to fill out forms.

All JusticeCorps members are supervised on a daily basis by the attorneys staffing the self help centers and all of their work is reviewed and approved by those attorneys.

Project rationale

Self-represented litigants face many obstacles in their attempts to resolve important legal matters, including a lack of familiarity with legal terms and mandatory forms and an inability to follow or fully comprehend court proceedings or orders given in court. Inability to resolve legal matters jeopardizes litigants' ability to secure safe, affordable housing, to overcome barriers to employment, to obtain guardianships, or to avoid domestic violence and elder abuse.

The Los Angeles superior court system handles over 300,000 cases per year where at least one party does not have professional legal representation. Many of the self help legal access centers around the county open their doors each morning to long lines of litigants waiting to receive assistance. JusticeCorps staff expect that JusticeCorps members will assist approximately 125,000 litigants this academic year. With trained JusticeCorps members' supporting the work of the legal aid attorneys at the centers, the attorneys are also expected to have more time to help more individuals, or offer more intensive services for particular litigants when needed.

Future directions

AOC staff hope to apply to the California Service Corps, the state agency responsible for administering most of California's AmeriCorps awards, to expand the program in January of 2006. After one year of implementation in Los Angeles, staff will be able to assess the strongest programmatic elements, and make recommendations for replicating in other counties in need.

Alternative Actions Considered

Not applicable

Comments From Interested Parties

None

Implementation Requirements and Costs

The JusticeCorps project is funded by a three year \$250,000 per year federal AmeriCorps grant. The grant funds pay primarily for the salaries of two project staff, JusticeCorps member training, and staff and student travel to and from the self-help center sites. As the author of the grant application and the lead fiscal agent, the AOC administers the AmeriCorps grant. The AOC also provides \$125,000 in trial court Modernization Fund money as part of the required matching funds contribution, as well as in-kind contributions of time from three AOC staff.

Los Angeles Superior houses and oversees the JusticeCorps staff. Los Angeles Superior is also contributing a .33 FTE supervising attorney to oversee the project.

Attachments

Newspaper articles from the *Los Angeles Times*

Map of JusticeCorps self-help legal access centers and university partners

JusticeCorps promotional flyer

National AmeriCorps program overview

Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES EDITION

Friday, November 19, 2004

latimes.com/california

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2004

ON THE LAW



KNOWLEDGE: Yesenia Valencia, left explains a legal form to a client. Valencia is a member of the California JusticeCorps

The Poor Get a Hand With Civil Justice System

College students in a pilot program help those who can't afford lawyers fill out papers and navigate the state's courts.

By JEAN GUCCIONE
Times Staff Writer

Yesenia Valencia sifts through packets of court forms, searching for the right one to give a woman representing herself in a custody dispute.

The college student has learned all about forms and how to complete them. She's part of an expanding program in California courts to guide people who can't afford lawyers through the complex civil justice system.

Valencia is one of 100 students inducted last month into the first California JusticeCorps class. The three-year pilot program matches student volunteers with 10 court-based self-help programs in Los Angeles County.

"We expect those 100 stu-

the county during the current academic year, said William C. Vickrey, administrative director of the California courts.

Most of the help is so basic that it requires no specialized legal skills. For example, students ensure that people have the right forms and know how to complete them.

More than 300,000 people embroiled in divorce or custody disputes, small claims actions and evictions went to court in Los Angeles County last year without lawyers, Vickrey said.

One or both parties in 80% of family law cases, 90% of people in landlord-tenant disputes and 100% of those in small claims matters were not represented by lawyers, he said.

Those statistics have led court officials to do more to help people trying to navigate the civil justice system on their own. They have simplified forms and translated them into several languages, published how-to booklets and established self-help legal centers at more than 50 courthouses statewide.

Now, JusticeCorps is providing the courts with volunteers.



Photographs by SPENCER WEINER Los Angeles Times

APERWORK: Cal State Northridge student Yesenia Valencia helps clients with the many color-coded legal papers available at the Self-Help Center in Van Nuys. Most of the help she and fellow students provide is so basic that it requires no specialized legal skills.

contributing 300 hours in an academic year in exchange for \$1,000 toward their educational expenses and, in some cases, class credit.

"They are going to get experience they can't get in the classroom," said Martha Wright, a court services analyst for the state, who said the public also will benefit. "We hope that time saved on the part of the litigants and the courts," she said.

Valencia is studying political science at Cal State Northridge and is thinking about law school. The 25-year-old North Hollywood woman saw a flier about the program at school and filled it out. She wants to help others. But she also knows that learning about the court system may come in handy some day.

"You don't know when you yourself will be involved in court," she said.

Many of the people Valencia met during her first weeks at the center were intimidated by the courts. "They don't want to make a mistake," she said.

Often there are educational and language barriers as well. "I've encountered people who don't know how to read, people who don't know how to write and people who do not speak English," said Heidi Bendana, 22, another volunteer.

"We let them know what options they have," she said.

More than 34,000 people lined up at self-help legal centers and family law information centers in Los Angeles County in the first six months of 2004, according to local court statistics.

"Many of the people who will be served by the JusticeCorps members would not have been able to file cases otherwise or would have found it far more difficult to do so," Robert A. Dukas, Los Angeles County Superior Court presiding judge, said at a swearing-in ceremony last month for the student volunteers.

Overworked court staffers not only lack the time to help people who are representing themselves; they also are prohibited by state law from offering legal advice.

Searching for new resources to aid self-represented litigants, court officials turned to the AmeriCorps national service program. Much of the state's \$13-million AmeriCorps grant goes to after-school tutoring and mentoring for children in low-income areas.

AmeriCorps officials liked the idea of putting students to work at court-based self-help centers. They gave the state's superior courts \$750,000 over three years to recruit, train and supervise undergraduates from UCLA, Cal State Dominguez Hills, Cal State Northridge and Cal Poly Pomona. There is a waiting list of applicants.

Kathy O'Byrne, director of UCLA's Center for Community Learning, said she had two applicants for each of the 50 spots she would fill. AmeriCorps, she said, gave students a chance to explore career options in law as well as serve their community.

Valencia and Bendana work a couple of days a week at the Van Nuys Self-Help Center, which is

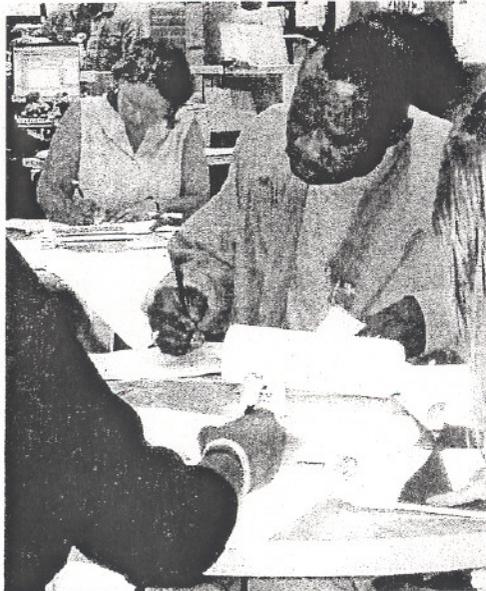
staffed by two lawyers and a paralegal. Without volunteers, "we couldn't possibly assist a fraction of the people who come in," said Caron Caines, the center's managing attorney.

Neal Dudovitz, executive director of Neighborhood Legal Services, which runs some of the self-help centers, said his staff tells litigants they are better off hiring a lawyer if they can afford one. If not, he said, the one-on-one help his staff and volunteers offer is the next best thing.

One of Valencia's first clients did not understand the paperwork her husband's lawyer sent. The attorney accused the woman of working too much and neglecting their child.

Valencia read the allegations to her in Spanish and asked the woman to respond. The student translated her answers into English and wrote on a standardized form that she could easily file.

"I felt really good I was able to help her write a response statement," Valencia said. Otherwise, "she might have landed up losing the child."



Help others
help themselves
find justice.



Learn about the law—and life—in return.

- Become a JusticeCorps member working in Los Angeles County's Self-Help Legal Access Centers.
- Recruitment begins in August 2004 for the fall semester.
- Go to www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/justicecorps or visit your campus Community Service Learning Office.

JusticeCorps



JusticeCorps is a collaborative project of the California Administrative Office of the Courts and Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles; California State University at Northridge; California State University at Dominguez Hills; University of California at Los Angeles; California State Polytechnic University, Pomona; Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles; Legal Aid Society of Orange County; and Neighborhood Legal Services.

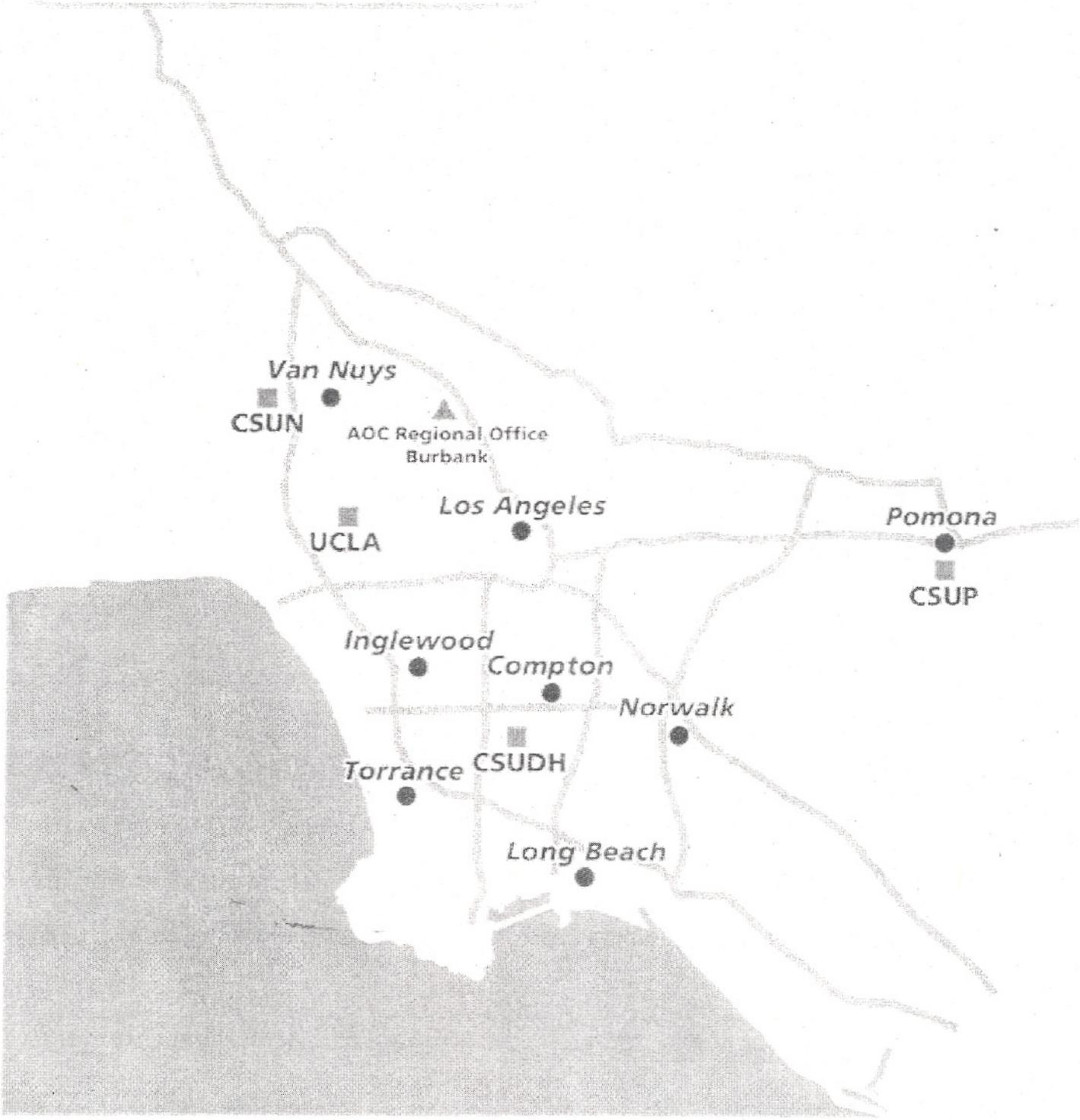


JusticeCorps

Lancaster

The Los Angeles JusticeCorps Project

- JusticeCorps Universities
- Los Angeles Self-Help Legal Access Centers
- ▲ AOC Southern Regional Office





AMERICORPS

Corporation for
**NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE**

In 1994, President Clinton signed the National and Community Service Act, the centerpiece of which was the creation of AmeriCorps – a domestic Peace Corps that would balance opportunity, responsibility, and community by engaging young people in service to their country in return for help in paying for a college education.

Who We Are: AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs that engage more than 50,000 Americans each year in intensive service to meet critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. AmeriCorps members serve through more than 2,100 nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. They tutor and mentor youth, build affordable housing, teach computer skills, clean parks and streams, run after-school programs, and help communities respond to disasters. AmeriCorps is part of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which also oversees Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America.

Overview: Since 1994, more than 250,000 men and women have served in AmeriCorps, providing needed assistance to millions of Americans. AmeriCorps provides trained, dedicated people to help nonprofits accomplish more and make more effective use of volunteers. President Bush has asked AmeriCorps to expand its work in public safety, public health, and disaster relief to assist in homeland security. The President has also proposed expanding AmeriCorps as part of his USA Freedom Corps initiative. AmeriCorps is made up of three programs: AmeriCorps*State and National, AmeriCorps*VISTA, and AmeriCorps*NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps).

AmeriCorps*State and National: More than three-quarters of AmeriCorps grant funding goes to Governor-appointed State Commissions, which in turn distribute and monitor grants to local nonprofits and agencies. The other quarter goes to national nonprofits that operate in more than one state. The organizations receiving grants are responsible for recruiting, selecting, and supervising AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps grantees include national groups like Habitat for Humanity, the American Red Cross, and Boys and Girls Clubs, as well as many small faith-based and community organizations. Approximately 44,000 members served in AmeriCorps*State and National programs in fiscal year 2001.

State Commissions sets policy and oversee grant making statewide. California has 23 California Service Corps Commissioners, all appointed by the Governor. The director of the California Commission is Ms. Maria Shriver.

Eligibility and Benefits: AmeriCorps is open to U.S. citizens, nationals, or lawful permanent residents aged 17 or older. Members serve full or part time over a 10- to 12-month period. After successfully completing a term of service, AmeriCorps members are eligible to receive an education award. The education award can be used to pay education costs, or to repay qualified student loans.

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YOUR CHANCE TO MAKE IT BETTER.