

Community Collaboration for the Development of a Community Legal Assistance Center

One-Stop Community Services

Several Calaveras County agencies concerned with self-represented litigants saw that their populations were overwhelmed by or fearful of the court system and needed more help. They collaborated with the [Superior Court of Calaveras County](#) to bring their legal assistance resources together in one location.

Only six months after the first planning meeting, the groups opened a one-stop help center in San Andreas. With a core staff of two, the center is open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. four days a week. The family law facilitator's office and the court clerk's office provide additional staff.

Center services focus on self-help. Visitors use computers and printers with easy online access to legal assistance Web sites, including

- The California Courts Online Self-Help Center (www.courtinfo.ca.gov/self-help)
- EZLegalFile (www.EZLegalFile.org—see page 44)
- The California Courts Web site (www.courtinfo.ca.gov/forms)

The center also has a comprehensive legal self-help library consisting of the California codes, [Nolo Press books](#), and other materials.

To keep down costs, each agency donated the time its staff members spent on planning the center. [Human Resources Council, Inc.](#), was selected to run the program, and space it was vacating was ideal for the center. The council used its funds to pay rent, utilities, and the core staff. The superior court contributed to rent, paid for staff from the family law facilitator program, provided the services of court personnel, and helped with grant funding. Other agencies donated surplus computers and furnishings. Information technology departments from the county and the court together created the infrastructure for public access to the Internet and e-mail. A committee developed press releases, pamphlets, and flyers to publicize the center, and the local [Calaveras Works and Human Services Agency](#) designed and printed the materials. That agency also donated funds to buy library reference materials.

A Resource Bank

In this financially strapped community, the collaborating agencies conceived of a bank that would pool existing resources to meet residents' needs instead of waiting until more money was available. Shared staff and resources give the agencies more bang for the buck. Each agency contributed time, services, expertise, or money. The center now brings together representatives from

- The superior court (judge, executive officer, and lead clerk)
- The family law facilitator's office
- The district attorney's office
- The probation department
- The Calaveras Works and Human Services Agency
- [The Human Resources Council, Inc.](#)
- The county library
- [Legal Services of Northern California](#)
- The county board of supervisors

Impacts

- In one year, 1,745 people visited the center. About 40 percent were return visitors. The legal services attorney served 439 visitors, the family law facilitator served 317, and 989 used the library or computers.
- Using clerical staff at the center, the family law facilitator program in Calaveras County was able to expand its services to now serve Amador County as well.
- The family law facilitator volunteered to train center staff members and works closely with them.
- A grant has enabled [Legal Services of Northern California](#) to provide services to people whose income exceeds the limit to qualify them for help but who still cannot afford a lawyer.
- On two days a week, the court clerk helps people one-on-one with legal procedures at the center, in a quiet place away from long lines. This has helped reduce congestion at the court's cramped counter.



Shari Reed, a paralegal from Legal Services of Northern California, assists a client at the Calaveras Community Legal Assistance Center.

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