

Goal IV

quality of justice and service to the public

Superior Courts of California,
COUNTIES OF SANTA CLARA (LEAD
COURT), SANTA CRUZ, SAN BENITO,
AND MONTEREY

REGIONAL COURT AND LIBRARY PARTNERSHIP

Bringing Self-Help Services to the Community

The courts in the four participating counties recognized several years ago that the steps they had taken to improve access to self-help services

were still not enough. The need of self-represented litigants far outstripped the counties' capacity to serve. In *Santa Clara County* alone, in one year, some 10,000 people were turned away because the court-sponsored Self-Service Center and Family Law Facilitator's Office lacked the resources to help them. Because they operate out of court locations and may have limited hours of operation, the court-sponsored centers also present barriers for segments of the population who need legal help but who live in far corners of the county and have fewer transportation options.

Studies and planning discussions by the courts led to the conclusion that the solution lay in reaching out to the community and involving public libraries. Court administrators and self-help service representatives helped conceive the project. Library representatives then were invited to refine the details, with the *Peninsula Library System* acting as lead representative and coordinator during the training phase.

The partnership groups collaborated to design a program that would

- ▶ Help public librarians to better understand the court system
- ▶ Teach librarians about available legal self-help services on the Internet
- ▶ Develop a court-library partnership that will continue beyond the self-help project
- ▶ Extend community outreach and disseminate self-help services to a wider population
- ▶ Strengthen public trust and confidence in and understanding of the courts

Having sought and been awarded a development and implementation grant from the Administrative Office of the Courts, the court-library partnership succeeded in training librarians throughout the four counties. Training team members included managing attorneys from court self-help programs and representatives from the AOC, the Superior Court of San Mateo County, and *Public Interest Clearinghouse*.

The training, held whenever possible in library computer labs, included interactive demonstrations to familiarize librarians with existing legal and related Web sites, such as the AOC's Online Self-Help Center (www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp) and San Mateo's www.ezlegalfile.org.

The project also created a Web page for librarians, www.systemref.org/law.htm, which pulled together essential legal sites from many sources. That Web page now features links to the court-sponsored

self-help centers. Two months after the training, the participating librarians completed a follow-up evaluation to report on their experience with the resources.

Librarians report that they are better able to help patrons find legal information and resources, and librarians from other parts of the state have inquired about replicating the program. Expansion plans for the project include a new self-help center in Watsonville, to be located downtown with the Watsonville public library and the county law library.

Impacts

- ▶ Established a first-of-its-kind partnership between public libraries and the courts.
- ▶ Trained 88 librarians over the course of six training sessions.
- ▶ Decentralized self-help resources by moving services into the community, greatly increasing public access.
- ▶ Produced more than 15,000 bookmarks listing important legal Web sites and distributed these to the courts and more than 80 library facilities around the region.

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A LIBRARIAN RESPONDS
“I’ve already had many very practical opportunities to use the information presented [in the training session].... I appreciate that the recommended Web sites are all user-friendly ... with just a brief demo, [people] were pretty much able to search and investigate on their own.”

—Librarian, Santa Cruz Public Library

Librarians, such as Watsonville’s Dody Anderson (shown left), report that they are better able to help patrons find information about legal issues and that they refer to the court’s resource materials daily.

