

Goal 1

access, fairness, and diversity

Superior Court of California,  
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

## JUSTICECORPS

### Recruiting Students as Court Volunteers

Self-represented litigants are inundating the self-help programs of the [Superior Court of Los Angeles County](#). The demand is so great that

people often must wait hours in long lines or receive only minimal help. Many of these litigants have low literacy skills, which hampers their ability to fill out forms, participate in self-help workshops, or use computerized resources.

Ensuring equal access to justice is a critical mission for the courts. But it's difficult to recruit and retain enough long-term volunteers for programs designed to supplement the help provided to the self-represented. To improve access and avoid these pitfalls, the Los Angeles court conceived [JusticeCorps](#) to find sufficient numbers of university students committed to serve long enough to justify a training investment and a service award.

Although the court crafted it, JusticeCorps actually represents a significant collaboration. For the pilot project in 2004, the court initially partnered with four universities—[UCLA](#) and California State Universities at [Northridge](#), [Dominguez Hills](#), and [Pomona](#)—four nonprofit legal-aid agencies, and the [Los Angeles County Small Claims Advisor](#) to operate the program. ([CSU Long Beach](#) has subsequently participated as well.) And with the help of the Administrative Office of the Courts, the court obtained funding from [AmeriCorps](#) for JusticeCorps.

Each year, the program places 100 students in eight court-based self-help centers throughout Los Angeles County. Students agree to serve at least 300 hours in a year, during which they

- ▶ Triage long lines at court-based self-help centers to determine each litigant's need and degree of urgency and help litigants complete the proper forms
- ▶ Make referrals to other court services
- ▶ Teach people to use self-help computer resources
- ▶ Provide services to litigants after hearings

In short, the volunteers enhance the quality and the quantity of self-help service to those who most need it.

**“As JusticeCorps members working in the courts, we help people understand. They take that understanding and pass it on. To me, that’s community strengthening. That’s building trust. Trust in one another and trust in the legal system.”**

—UCLA senior and JusticeCorps member  
who entered law school in fall 2007

The students also benefit. After they fulfill their commitment, they receive a \$1,000 award, to be used for tuition or student loans. They also participate in JusticeCorps Shadow Day, which partners them with mentor judges and attorneys for a view of other aspects of the judicial system and the value of public service.

To evaluate the effectiveness of JusticeCorps, program staff members look for specific increases in the number of self-represented litigants assisted and in the accuracy of documents prepared and referrals made. The program has, to date, far exceeded its target measures.

In its second year, JusticeCorps began funding a campus representative position (filled by program alumni) for each campus, to help recruit and motivate student participants. The partner universities advertise the program on campus and facilitate "Reflection Sessions," in which students evaluate their work in the courts.

## Impacts

- ▶ Self-help programs supplemented by JusticeCorps members increased by 11 percent the number of self-represented litigants assisted in the program's first year.
- ▶ Evaluations showed that litigants got appropriate referrals 98 percent of the time when JusticeCorps members referred them to other legal resources.
- ▶ Legal forms prepared by self-represented litigants with JusticeCorps assistance showed a 94 percent accuracy rate.
- ▶ Focus groups of litigants reported a high level of satisfaction with the JusticeCorps program and the services they received.
- ▶ On average, each class of JusticeCorps volunteers has been collectively fluent in more than 20 languages.
- ▶ In its third year, the JusticeCorps program expanded to Northern California, partnering with four San Francisco Bay Area universities.

**WHEN WORDS ARE ENOUGH**  
**"A woman who spoke only Spanish came into the self-help center. She wanted a civil restraining order against her neighbor.... [Afterward] I thought, what if nobody had been there who spoke Spanish. This case was the first in which I felt I made a difference. And I made a difference just by translating."**

—a JusticeCorps graduate

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