

Self-Help Assistance and Referral Program (SHARP)

Videoconferences for Rural Clients

The superior courts in the neighboring rural counties of [Butte](#), [Glenn](#), and [Tehama](#) saw that the volume of calls by self-represented clients to court clerks was growing. To effectively and economically give self-represented residents the assistance they needed, the courts joined forces to create the [Self-Help Assistance and Referral Program \(SHARP\)](#). Funded by a grant from the Administrative Office of the Courts, the program offers procedural help (not legal advice) in matters such as

- Family law issues not covered by the family law facilitator
- General civil cases
- Guardianships
- Unlawful detainer (both landlord and tenant)
- Domestic violence and civil harassment restraining orders
- Elder abuse
- Name changes
- Emancipation

To cover the wide geographic area without requiring parties to travel long distances, the program planners turned to videoconferencing technology and high-speed connections. SHARP set up centers in or near courthouses across the three counties.

The managing attorney conducts videoconference workshops on particular topics, offering information and answering participants' questions. Residents can interact simultaneously with the attorney and each other. Spanish interpreters at any center can help clients during the conference. As the attorney broadcasts from one center, administrative staff or volunteers at the other centers help people face-to-face during the conference. The attorney travels to each center on a rotating basis.

Clients walking into the centers at other times can independently use computer self-help programs and workbooks the staff has developed. These contain simple instructions for navigating the legal system (for example, how to file an answer in an unlawful detainer case; how to prepare for a court hearing). If clients hit a snag, they can get help from an administrative support person and trained volunteers. The centers also conduct group workshops. Volunteers come from the local university, law schools, and service organizations.

The staff has also compiled a resource directory with information, pamphlets, and guides about other help clients may need—from finding housing to helping troubled teens, to finding an affordable lawyer. The managing attorney is collaborating with [Legal Services of Northern California](#) to produce a video on how to respond to an unlawful detainer action.

Most and Least Helpful Methods

To plan the program, the courts surveyed the public, legal professionals, court staff, and service providers to learn what needs were unmet and how best to meet them. Respondents said that face-to-face individual and group conferences were the most helpful formats, while telephone recordings and unstaffed law libraries were least helpful.

Impacts

- In 2003, SHARP assisted just under 7,000 parties. Contact and participation statistics are continuing to rise, and the program is beginning to see repeat clients.
- Clients receive quality self-help services that would not have been economically feasible for each court to provide independently.
- The clerks' offices are able to refer parties to a reliable program.
- Because self-represented parties file more complete and accurate documents and are better prepared for court hearings, case delays and court clerks' workloads have been reduced.

A Bonus: Better Court Practices

Judges and court administrators from all three counties contributed to obtaining the grants; choosing the managing attorney; setting priorities; and deciding on the services, program details, and center locations. From information compiled on local court policies and procedures the managing attorney recommended each court's effective and efficient practices to the other courts, which increased their uniformity.



Left: Attorney Suzanne Morlock meets via videoconference with assistant Margaret Vasquez-Ahrens and a Spanish-speaking litigant. Vasquez-Ahrens translates as Morlock answers the litigant's questions.

Below: At the same time, Morlock instructs two SHARP clients as they complete DV forms.



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