

Spanish Self-Help Center: Centro de Recursos Legales

Clear, Correct Court Information in Spanish

The Hispanic population of Fresno County has grown almost 50 percent since 1990, reaching 44 percent of the county's total. Growth is expected to continue, particularly in the outlying farm communities, where concentrated pockets of Spanish-speaking residents constitute from 65 to 98 percent of the population.

Self-represented Spanish-speaking litigants commonly complained that they found court forms cumbersome and hard to understand, that court procedures were unfamiliar to them and seemed complex, and that they couldn't communicate effectively with the court staff.

The Superior Court of Fresno County responded by developing a Spanish self-help center, [Centro de Recursos Legales](#), located separately from the downtown Fresno courthouse and offering four approaches to meet the needs of this population.

1. Simple (fifth-grade reading level) self-help instruction pamphlets in Spanish about the legal issues most commonly faced by the target population:
 - Family law
 - Guardianship
 - Unlawful detainer
 - Civil harassment
2. Family law "How-to" clinics, held weekly, at which a court examiner who speaks Spanish explains court forms line by line, answers clients' questions, and explains procedures such as service and return of process.
3. Review of clients' completed court documents by the court examiner (for people attending the clinic or walk-in users at other times).
4. A Community Volunteer Interpreter Bureau that provides volunteer interpreters to assist self-represented Spanish-speaking litigants as their cases proceed.

The center is open four days a week. On Fridays, the staff goes out to community centers in the area to spread the word about the center's services.

Community Members Serving Community Members

The Community Volunteer Interpreter Bureau draws volunteers from educational institutions and local community groups, including

- [The Fresno-Madera Area Agency on Aging](#)
- [The Southern School of Interpreters](#)
- [The Cesar Chavez Adult School](#)
- The Microcomputer Education Center

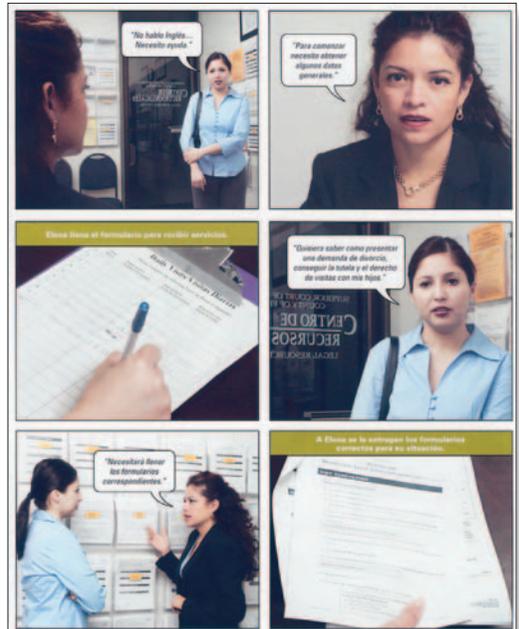
Under the direction of the court's community resource manager and an advisory committee of community leaders and court personnel, the bureau recruits, trains, mentors, and tests volunteer interpreters.

Impacts

- In its first four months, the center served 620 litigants. On average, more than 160 self-represented litigants are helped each month.
- The interpreter bureau has developed a broader pool of qualified Spanish-language translators and has helped some of them qualify for certification as court interpreters.
- The Spanish-speaking population has access to understandable, accurate information about the courts, legal processes, judicial procedures, and required legal documents.
- The self-help center makes the law and the courts more user-friendly for a high proportion of the county population that was underserved before.

Model Program Funding

The Administrative Office of the Courts funded the program for three years with a grant from its Model Self-Help Pilot Program. The Superior Court of Fresno County hopes that the Legislature will continue to fund the center, based on the very positive reports about its impact.



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