

**Judicial Council of California
Model Self-Help Centers Pilot Program
Overview of Five Funded Programs**

Regional model: Superior Court of California, County of Butte

❖ **Goals of the model**

This is a regional program that is intended to serve at least two (2) smaller counties. This model will explore how counties that may not be able to afford a full-time attorney at a self-help center can share resources effectively with other counties. What agreements are necessary? What special challenges exist, and what can be done to overcome them?

❖ **Butte County's program**

Butte County Superior Court is partnering with Glenn and Tehama counties to provide assistance to self-represented litigants in the areas of small claims, unlawful detainer, eviction, fair housing, employment, SSI, enforcement of judgments, guardianships, name changes, family law issues not addressed by the Family Law Facilitator, bankruptcy, criminal appeals, Marsden-Public Defender substitutions, probate, general civil procedures, tax, tenant housing, and senior law issues. An attorney coordinator will conduct workshops and clinics through the use of real-time videoconferencing, enabling self-represented litigants in three counties to receive assistance simultaneously.

➤ **Expected outcomes**

Increased access to justice: Self-represented litigants living in rural/agricultural region of the state, where at least 1 in 5 households are at or below the poverty level, will be able to receive attorney assistance via video-teleconferencing workshops in a majority of general civil areas of the law. California has over 175 Judicial Council forms in Family Law alone. SHARP will assist them in filling out the forms and informing them about the proper court procedures and filing process. This assistance increases their access to the justice system by helping them to select the proper forms.

Increased user satisfaction with the court process: It is anticipated that with assistance to identify the use of proper forms, help in completing the forms (via clinics/workshops, education as to the proper court form and filing process), reductions in delays will be the result and continuances for improper procedures will be reduced. Self-represented litigants will have better outcomes, by reducing frustration and intimidation of the judicial process. Participants will be given surveys at the conclusion of their workshop to measure satisfaction at the services provided.

Increased efficiency and effectiveness of the court system: By assisting the self-represented to use the proper forms, helping them complete the forms, and

explaining the proper filing and court procedures, the public will come to court more prepared. This will facilitate matters before the court being resolved in a timely and efficient manner, reducing the number of delays and continuances typically encountered by those not familiar with the court process.

Urban collaboration model: Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles

❖ **Goals of the model**

This is a program intended to coordinate self-help centers in a large jurisdiction. In some jurisdictions a number of self-help centers operate in or near the court, often with limited communication or sharing of resources. This is likely to lead to duplication of efforts and confusion for litigants. The urban collaboration model seeks to coordinate resources and provide a more seamless service delivery system for litigants.

❖ **Los Angeles County's program**

Los Angeles County Superior Court's program creates a centralized Self-Help Management Center that will develop partnerships with the court, the local bar, local schools, and local social service organizations; coordinate self-help activities on a county-wide basis; and standardize self-help intake procedures and protocols throughout the county. Services rendered by the center include the provision of informational materials about the court and its proceedings and procedures; instructions on how to complete forms; and the provision of reference materials regarding legal service providers, social service agencies, and government agencies, as well as other educational material. Clients can attend workshops or receive one-on-one assistance.

➤ **Expected outcomes**

The following represent some of the specific short and long-term outcomes the urban collaborative model hopes to achieve:

- Increased partnerships between the court, the local bar, local schools and local community service organizations;
- Increased coordination of Self-Help activities on a county-wide basis;
- Increased standardization of self-help intake procedure and protocols throughout the County; and
- Increased funding sources such as grants.

In addition, the self-help centers hope to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increased access to justice for self-represented litigants.
- Increased understanding of, and compliance with, the terms of court orders court procedures;
- Increased efficiency and effectiveness of the court system; and
- Increased user satisfaction with the court process.

The urban collaborative model has been developed and designed to encourage partnership, sharing of resources and eliminate duplication of efforts. These outcomes will result in multiple self-help centers that serve to educate litigants

about court procedures, which will eventually lead to a more efficient and effective court system. Litigants should feel a greater sense of satisfaction with the courts because they have a greater understanding of the system and their role in it. In addition, litigants will be encouraged to return to the self-help centers after proceedings are concluded to review their court orders and discuss their responsibility for compliance.

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| <i>Technology model: Superior Court of California, County of Contra Costa</i> |
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❖ **Goals of the model**

This is a program intended to emphasize the use of technology in providing services. As the number of self-represented litigants increases, technological solutions are being explored for completion of forms, provision of information, meeting with litigants at a distance, and other needed services. This model will utilize and evaluate the effectiveness of at least two (2) methods of utilizing technology to provide services.

❖ **Contra Costa County's program**

Contra Costa Superior Court will combine and deliver expert information and assistance via the Internet, computer applications, and real-time videoconference workshops to create a Virtual Self-Help Law Center for self-represented litigants with dissolution, child custody and visitation, domestic violence, civil, and guardianship cases. Virtual Self-Help Law Center resources will help parties navigate the court process; complete, file, and serve court forms; handle their court hearings; understand and comply with court orders; and conduct certain mediations at a distance.

➤ **Expected outcomes**

Contra Costa County Superior Court has experienced a dramatic increase over the past decade in the number of self-represented litigants appearing before the court. When viewed in its entirety, the Virtual Self-Help Law Center should improve a self-represented litigant's capacity to handle dissolution, child custody and visitation, domestic violence, and guardianship cases—thereby increasing the satisfaction of litigants, judicial officers, and court professionals alike. This proposal addresses each of the six outcomes listed in the Request for Proposal Guidelines. By focusing on ways to deliver information and assistance to self-represented litigants when, where, and how they need it, the Virtual Self-Help Law Center becomes a uniquely responsive vehicle for addressing both general and case-specific questions, and accommodating those with literacy barriers, or who have varying learning styles or other special needs. By offering information and assistance to the parents of children who are the subject of guardianship proceedings, we will address their as-yet unmet need to understand the court process, their obligations under any resulting court orders, and their options for modifying guardianship orders or reunifying their families. By allowing parents to hold mediation sessions via videoconference, some with domestic violence issues will be able to have at least limited dialogue regarding their preferred

parenting plan, while maintaining the distance and safety appropriate to their circumstances. Videoconference mediations may also allow parents or litigants with other types of cases who live in Southern California or out of state to avoid traveling to Martinez. Videoconference mediation in child custody and visitation cases will have the added benefit of freeing an estimated 100 hours of already-scarce family court services' mediator time for other case-related activities.

Spanish-speaking model: Superior Court of California, County of Fresno

❖ **Goals of the model**

The large number of Spanish-speaking litigants in California presents special challenges for self-help programs. This model will seek to provide cost-effective and efficient services for a primarily Spanish-speaking population while exploring techniques for educating litigants about the legal issues and procedures in their cases.

❖ **Fresno County's program**

The Spanish Self-Help Education and Information Center developed by Fresno County Superior Court will serve self-represented litigants in the areas of guardianship, unlawful detainer, civil harassment, and family law. The center will provide daily access to Spanish language self-help instructions, establish a volunteer interpreter bureau, provide a Spanish-speaking Court Examiner to review court documents, and sponsor clinics with rotating "how-to" lectures for the areas of law specified above.

➤ **Expected outcomes**

Increased Access to Justice: A) Establish a Center that will provide Spanish language self-help instructions for use in completing court documents. B) Provide Spanish-speaking Court Examiner to assist pro per litigant in completing court form at the Centers. C) Provide volunteer interpreters on an "as needed" basis to help pro per litigants with translations at Court hearings. D) Extend this program to outlying courts in Clovis, Coalinga, Firebaugh, Fowler, Kerman, Kingsburg, Reedley, Sanger, and Selma.

Increased Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Court System: A) Collaboration with community based organizations to form a Spanish Community Volunteer Interpreter Bureau. B) Provide interpreter assistance through the volunteer bureau. C) Review of court documents by a Spanish-speaking Court Examiner to ensure accuracy, resulting in less errors. C) Review of court documents by a Spanish-speaking Court Examiner to ensure accuracy, resulting in less errors.

Increased User Satisfaction with Court Process: A) Availability of Spanish language self-help instructions for use in completing court documents. B) Availability of interpreters to assist with forms or at Court hearings. C) Access to "how-to" clinics conducted by Spanish speaking Court Examiner.

Increased Education for Court Users: A) Develop simple written Spanish self-help instructions for court forms. B) Conduct “how-to” Clinics with rotating lectures on Guardianship, Unlawful Detainer, Civil Harassment and Family Law by Spanish speaking Court Examiner.

Multilingual model: Superior Court of California, County of San Francisco

❖ **Goals of the model**

California has a diverse population with a large group of immigrants and litigants who speak many different languages and have significantly different experiences. This model will seek to provide self-help services to litigants who speak a wide variety of languages and develop materials and techniques to address the needs of a multilingual, multicultural population.

❖ **San Francisco County’s program**

San Francisco Superior Court’s program establishes a Multi-Lingual Court Access Service Project which will assist self-represented litigants in family law, dependency mediation, probate, small claims, civil harassment, child support, and other general civil cases. The center will create formal partnerships with community-based organizations that provide services to ethnic populations and those that address legal issues for self-represented litigants. A bilingual attorney will work with clients to ensure adequate services for them within the court and provide referrals to appropriate community and legal agencies. Additional services include the translation of court materials, the development of a multi-lingual computerized self-help directory, and recruitment and coordination of multi-lingual interpreters.

➤ **Expected outcomes**

Increased understanding of, and compliance with, the terms of the court orders: In many cases our efforts are to resolve matters so that a client does not need to see a judge. When s/he does, as often happens in Small Claims, litigants neither understand what the judge said, nor what the judge ordered. Their confusion leaving the court can be worse than when they came in. The Triage Attorney’s office will remain involved in the case until the final disposition or order. Interpreters, whether court-funded, via CBO’s, or through family and friends, will be with the client throughout the process. After an order is given, the Triage Attorney will meet with the client and interpreter and review it, until we are certain that the client understands the terms and conditions. This understanding by the client is also linked to “User Satisfaction.” When a litigant understands the process both literally and conceptually – when s/he understands the judge’s words and knows that the process has been fair – compliance problems are significantly reduced.

Access to justice: The rationale of this outcome is as simple as the methods to achieve it are complicated: all clients should – regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, income, linguistic skills, ethnicity, disability – have equal access to the courts and equal ability to participate in court proceedings. This San

Francisco grant will greatly increase access for those who are mono-lingual, as our Family Law Facilitation site does for all self-represented family litigants. These are elements in a much broader vision: to provide enhanced services court-wide. The structure of the proposal would itself be a model so that in the future, *all* self-represented litigants would be directed to a Self-Help Center that would have the resources and local collaborations to provide a system similar to the one proposed here.

As detailed in the proposal, our services would vastly improve self-represented court access. For example, proof of service is a significant procedural problem, and none suffer worse than the clients who are mono-lingual and do not understand the details of proof, where matters are thereby delayed endlessly and clients often surrender and go home. Language barriers, even for those with limited English, can come to a hasty end as the client is frustrated in his/her attempts to seek American justice, and can cause a great amount of time for court staff.

User satisfaction: Studies and surveys are increasingly finding that court clients experience *satisfaction* from the perception of *just processes* as distinct from their own judicial triumph—that is, if clients feel they have been heard and their perspectives listened to, if they feel the court can be simultaneously neutral *and* empathetic, and if they understand the procedures and that they apply equally to all parties, clients feel that the outcome is fair, regardless of results. This hypothesis also covers the question regarding “Just Outcomes” below. We will be conducting extensive client surveys to evaluate the success of our model and make on-going changes based on client comments.

Increased efficiency and effectiveness of the court system: It is difficult to quantify, but easy to observe, the percentage of time devoted to clients whose language cannot be understood. For example, in the past few years staff who speak Spanish, including an interpreter and Spanish translated documents, have been added to most Family Court programs, and the number of continuances and proof of service problems have dropped drastically. Prior to these changes, sending clients home to bring in bi-lingual family or friends, spending time to find an interpreter, translating documents, continuances and providing often misunderstood direct services averaged 20-30% more staff time than the current bi-lingual situation. We also have a Cantonese-speaking staff attorney in one program that again significantly reduces staff time in that department, as compared to most programs where no Cantonese is spoken.

Moreover, there are elements that cannot be quantified but contribute to a significant amount of time and stress for both staff and for clients: when staff attentively tries to assist a client who can just barely speak English, a great deal of frustration and time spent affects both parties. This situation is worsened when other clients are waiting in line, who now feel irritation at staff and hostility toward the client. Competent and responsive staff often becomes less responsive as time goes on and requests a transfer to non-public duties.