

# Los Angeles County Superior Court JusticeCorps Focus Groups Report

## Executive Summary

2007

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“[The JusticeCorps members] were knowledgeable, they were friendly, they made you feel comfortable.”

– *Dissolution workshop customers talking about JusticeCorps members*

“[T]here’s an energy that these kids bring that they have that really is infectious—this is not a happy place most of the time—and that energy and that enthusiasm and that spirit really sort of infuses itself into the people who work here....”

– *Court Administrator talking about the impact of JusticeCorps members*

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## **Description of Study**

### ***Purpose and overview***

This executive summary compiles the findings from a series of six focus groups of self-help center staff and customers served in the Los Angeles County Superior Court at self-help centers with JusticeCorps member assistants. The primary goal of the focus groups was to help JusticeCorps program staff at the Administrative Office of the Courts and Los Angeles Superior assess the effectiveness and impact of services provided by JusticeCorps student volunteers. This information is best acquired through in depth, interactive conversations with those who receive the services (customers), and those who are involved with their delivery (self-help center staff and assistants including JusticeCorps members) or otherwise experience their impact (court clerks and judges). The central research topic was the impact of the JusticeCorps volunteers on the low income customers of the self help centers and their children. A secondary goal was to provide information to improve the effectiveness of the centers themselves This Executive Summary covers the methodology and key findings with regard to those two goals.

### ***Use of qualitative data***

In order to uncover what customers understand about a service, what the service means to them, their reasons for judging a service helpful or unhelpful, and how that help fits into the larger context of their legal problem and lives, more in-depth information is needed than can be gathered using surveys or administrative statistics. Such information is only available through interactive conversations with those who receive the services (customers), and those who are involved with their delivery (self-help center staff such as JusticeCorps students) or otherwise experience their impact (court clerks and judicial officers). This type of information, generally known as qualitative data, is gathered through individual interviews, group interview/discussions such as focus groups, and direct observations.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Types of services represented***

There are two basic types of services at the centers that were part of this study. All but one of the customer focus groups were drawn from those who had received some type of one-on-one assistance from the center. With some slight variation, customers were asked about their legal problem and given a pertinent packet of forms and information. The next step was to meet one-on-one with a volunteer (JusticeCorps or otherwise) or paralegal to go over the forms and get them filled out. Depending on how busy the center was, some customers had to wait for a volunteer to be available. An attorney was always available to answer questions, and all completed forms were reviewed by an attorney. The types of cases covered were family law (dissolution, child custody, and name change), and landlord/tenant (unlawful detainer).

In one group, the customers had attended a series of three workshops on marriage dissolution. The workshops handled 10-12 customers at a time. They were run by an attorney who was assisted by one volunteer for about every three participants.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the need for qualitative methodologies to uncover meanings and understandings, see e.g., Piaget, J. (1998/1929). *The Child's Conception of the World* ( pp. 1–32). London, UK: Routledge and Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

## Methodology

Six focus groups were conducted consisting of 25 self-help center customers and 8 court staff. Self-help center participants were recruited using lists of recently served customers. Most of the customer participants were Latino (23 of 25). One group was held in Spanish, and most of the other groups had at least one person who preferred to speak in Spanish. The customer participants were low income, and 20 of the 25 had children at home. The group of court staff consisted of judicial officers and court administrators who were recruited by the self-help center director.

### Location of Centers and Types of Services Discussed

Center Locations	Services	Languages	Legal Issues	Participants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Downtown Los Angeles (3)</li> <li>• Van Nuys (1)</li> <li>• Pomona (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops (1)</li> <li>• Individual assistance (4)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• English</li> <li>• Spanish</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Divorce</li> <li>• Child custody</li> <li>• Unfinished cases</li> <li>• Eviction</li> <li>• Name change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers (5 groups, 25 people)</li> <li>• Court personnel (1 group, 8 people)</li> </ul>

Characteristics of the self-help center participants were:

- **Ages:** 25 to 52 (most mid-30's, early 40's).
- **Sex:** 2/3 women; 1/3 men.
- **Ethnicity:** Most customers English speaking Latino.
- **Education:** Most some high school, high school diploma, or some college.
- **Employment:** Most employed but low income (under \$1,200 per month).
- **Marital status:** Evenly distributed between married, single, separated, divorced.
- **Adults in household:** Mostly one or two.
- **Children in household:** Most had one or two.
- **Language spoken at home:** English (10); Spanish (9); Mixed (6).

The facilitators followed a written script keyed to predetermined research questions. Researchers also used "probes" to adjust the script questions for the purpose of generating more discussion as necessary, or yielding information more directly pertinent to the research questions.

Approximately 20-30 participants were recruited for each focus group which ultimately yielded an actual participant size of three to eight individuals per group. Focus group sessions were approximately 1 1/2 hours long. As incentives and remuneration, customer participants were provided with dinner and retail store gift cards. Researchers followed protection of human subjects protocol by informing participants of their rights, asking for and receiving verbal consent, and keeping reported comments anonymous

The focus groups were tape recorded and then transcribed. Spanish language sections of the recordings were translated into English. The transcripts were coded and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. Results are reported using textual summaries of focus group dialogue and verbatim quotes from the speakers. All transcripts were compared for themes that arose across groups. The findings presented are those on which consensus was reached either within or across groups. If contrasting views emerged, those differences are noted.

## Results

The focus groups provided some useful suggestions for the delivery of self-help services. In particular, there emerged from the data some important information about the circumstances of people coming into the centers, qualities that seem to make center services truly helpful, and benefits that accrue to courts and JusticeCorps students from the centers and the JusticeCorps program.

### ***Customer Profile***

Something of a profile of self-help center customers is evident from these transcripts that is not told by looking at demographic data such as age, gender, or ethnicity, nor is it revealed through post-service satisfaction surveys. As described below, litigants are coming into self-help centers anxious, confused, frustrated, desperate, scared, and sometimes angry. Most have already endured long delays for reasons they only partially, if at all, understand.

#### ***Customers are confused, anxious, and often frustrated***

These customers often talked about the confusion, anxiety, frustration, and to some extent desperation that they felt coming into the courthouse, and/or before encountering the self-help center staff.

“[Y]ou are literally frustrated. It’s like you’re at the end of your rope and ... you kind of just get to the point where you say okay, if this don’t work I’ll just give up.” – *Center customer*

#### ***Customers have experienced incomprehensible delays***

People spoke of having their cases drag on for many months, or even years, with little or no progress. Filings were frequently rejected for reasons that were not understood by the litigants, which made it hard for them to correct the problem.

“[Prior to the self-help center] you continue it over, you get some help but, then you come back, it’ll be a little bit better but it will still be not anywhere close a lot of times. So it’d have to be continued then a second time.” *Judicial Officer*

#### ***Customers have been unable to find affordable help***

While the customers we talked with said they came to the self-help center because they could not afford an attorney, most of them also explained that they had tried and failed to find help elsewhere.

“[The court] kept referring me to attorneys, but I couldn’t afford the attorneys. ... To, you know, lesser fee attorneys. Even one that they did give me they never answered. And then one was out of service....” – *Center customer*

## ***Self-Help Center Service Insights***

These customers wanted to feel confident they were talking with someone who understood their situation and was dedicated to helping them find answers to their questions. They wanted to be able to “take the next step” in their cases, which meant completing the necessary paperwork and understanding the court processes they were facing. If they were going to court, they wanted information about what to expect and what they should do there. It was also important for these customers that they be treated fairly and respectfully by the staff of the self-help centers.

### ***Service that reduces stress***

These customers were coming into centers with a fairly high level of stress, from a variety of sources. Consequently, services that had the effect of reducing that stress were especially appreciated.

“[T]he workshop itself made it so easy and stress free—honestly—that it was like right there, you walked in and you knew that they were going to give you all the information and the help you needed right away.” – *Workshop customer*

### ***Service that gives prompt answers to questions***

Customers wanted answers to questions when they called or asked them, rather than referrals and appointments.

“...after running around, like I said, making phone calls and stuff, you get in there and it’s like a breath of fresh air because everything that you need is right there.” – *Center customer*

### ***Service that is pro-active***

Customers particularly appreciated staff who talked with people who were standing in line, assessed their needs, informed them about what to expect, and in many cases, encouraged them to work on filling out needed forms while they were waiting.

“You don’t know exactly who to go to and they go, “Oh can I help you? Are you here for the workshop?” You know, you don’t have to ask anything. Before you can get the question out they’re like, “You need help?” Someone’s immediately right there.” – *Workshop customer*

### ***Service committed to finding an answer***

The difference between experience at the centers and many similar experiences litigants had trying to get help was, simply put, the difference between “I don’t know, I can’t help you” and “I don’t know, let me find out.”

### ***Respectful treatment by service providers***

In addition to getting practical help, these customers appreciated and valued the manner in which they were treated – fairly and respectfully.

- C1: They treat us with respect. Not ... downgrade us by ... what we're capable of doing or not doing, or our situation, you know, or like "Well, you're not paying anyways" kind of attitude.
- C2: Yeah, no judgment or anything.

***Service that creates trust, inspires confidence, and shows concern for the customer's situation***

Customers expressed a high degree of trust and confidence in the staff that went a long way in easing their fears and anxiety.

"They were knowledgeable, they were friendly, they made you feel comfortable." –  
*Center customer*

***Service that eases customers financial worries***

Customers were clearly relieved that the service was free and that they would not have to come up with substantial amounts of money to pay an attorney.

"Financial frustration was eliminated. That's the key. Most of the people that were in the workshop ... were all having the same type of issue. It was the money." – *Center customer*

***Attention to detail, experienced staff, and practical advice, are important to customers***

Not everyone was completely pleased with the quality of help they received. In the workshops, for example, there were apparently some problems with getting copied papers back in the proper order. In some cases of individual assistance, customers reported being initially helped by staff who seemed to be inexperienced (there were many things they appeared unfamiliar with), or simply told them what boxes to fill in and where to sign without offering much explanation. Other people explained that they would have liked a little more help in understanding the court system:

"It doesn't have to be elaborate, it doesn't have to be expansive, it doesn't have to be too time consuming – just, okay, we're going to sit down after we fill out your paperwork and we're going to have a little court awareness session with you." – *Center customer*

***Protection of privacy may be important***

Some customers explained that keeping personal details as private as possible, and not making them retell their story to several people were important in maintaining their dignity.

"[M]ost of the things that we're going to court for, it's pretty personal you don't want to go and discuss it with everybody." – *Center customer*

Others, such as some workshop participants, were happy to share their thoughts, feelings and insights with those in similar situations. For them, the opportunity to network was considered an advantage.

### ***Dissolution workshops***

The customers in the workshop focus group (which was small – 3 people) were quite pleased with the workshop model of helping them complete their divorces. The marriage dissolution process is fairly complicated, involving several steps, having to serve notice, and make potentially difficult decisions about very personal and sometimes complicated subjects like division of property and custody of children.

Customers in the workshops felt they had a good understanding of what was happening in court because they were given information at a pace they could understand.

“[They go] detail by detail, step by step, at our pace not their pace, you know? ...it kind of reminded me when you were just starting school, and they were going step by step and no rushing, no nothing.” – *Workshop customer*

Customers came away feeling they understood the process well.

“[Y]ou knew exactly why you were waiting so many months between the workshops, ... because of the reason of you’re served and you’re entering a default or so on.” – *Workshop customer*

If they should have to make a court appearance, workshop customers reported they felt “confident,” “comfortable,” and “no fear whatsoever” because of the reassurance and information they had been given in the workshop.

### ***Different types of cases may call for different types of assistance***

The usefulness of procedural assistance in getting the paperwork filled out properly is clear, but so is the desire for legal advice in circumstances in which rights are not understood, and likely outcomes are nearly impossible for unrepresented litigants to predict.

“When I did my divorce, I was comfortable with that situation when I left here. I was confident everything was going to be okay. In the court everything was done right. With my eviction, I was not comfortable. ...because ... they’re not letting me know my options, whether I can fight to try to stay there or how long do I have before I go? Everything is up in the air.” – *Center customer*

## ***Court Operations Insights***

### ***Self-help centers should have enough staff to see people the same day***

Court staff noted the difference JusticeCorps students made by enabling everyone who came to the centers to be seen the same day.

“Before JusticeCorps, I used to feel sorry for all the people that worked in the Family Information Office, especially on Friday afternoons. [The customers have] been sitting here all afternoon. They’re waiting to be seen and they can’t be seen, so they’re hostile. ... That has dissipated. It just went away.” – *Court staff*

***Self-help centers can help self-represented litigants become get calmer, better informed, and better prepared litigants – leading to clearer, more enforceable orders***

The importance of the work being done by the self-help center staff was explained by judicial officers who had noticed improvements both in the quality of hearings, and the quality of final orders being issued.

“After we reduce the level of tension, and after we improve our procedures with the feedback one, the product, the end product is also better, and it’s such a relief to have somebody come into court representing themselves who actually covers the issues that they’re supposed to cover, has the paperwork done correctly.” – *Judicial officer*

***Self-help centers can save clerk time***

Administrators in charge of filing clerks also noted the benefit to their staff of having high quality self-help assistance available.

[I]t saves us reprocessing the same judgment over and over again. So, if they have problems with it we can send them to a workshop or to another self-help group we have and they get it fixed, and can then submit it in a way that we can accept it. – *Court administrator*

***Court based self-help services can serve as a catalyst for improving and standardizing court procedures***

One aspect of fairness is having the same court procedures for everyone with similar legal problems. Inconsistent procedures can lead to perceived unfairness, and in some cases actual unfairness. These court professionals noted that the presence of self-help centers in their courthouse led to new discussions about how filings should be processed, and helped create more uniform processes.

[Y]ou ... gain from the presence of a really strong self help movement here administratively in a way that I hadn’t anticipated. We have learned so much from the people working with the unrepresented or self represented litigants so that we have improved our processing of judgments and our rejection sheet because now we understand better how confusing it is for people.

## Research Questions Addressed

Nine questions were developed, in consultation with the various JusticeCorps partners, prior to conducting the study. The questions and their answers are set out in the table below.

Question	Answer	Quotes
Why are litigants representing themselves in court?	Most litigants are representing themselves in court because they can't afford an attorney or it would be a severe hardship to pay for an attorney.	"[A]s far as legal-wise I couldn't afford the fee either, ...for an attorney or again to fill out the papers correctly. I've tried to do it, that's how I ended up referred up here. It took me almost two years doing my own papers back and forth which I could have prevented had I known they were up here." – <i>Center customer</i> .
What types of services are or would be most helpful?	Unrepresented litigants want prompt and individualized answers to their questions.	"You are made to feel so comfortable [at the workshop], you know, like "Don't worry, it's going to get fixed," and the way they would—the JusticeCorps members—how they were going around and right behind you, you would do something wrong, right away on the spot they would tell you." – <i>Workshop customer</i>
Do the services help customers better understand the court system?	Self-help center services help customers better understand the procedure that will be followed in their case.	"[Y]ou knew exactly why you were waiting so many months between the workshops, ... because of the reason of you're served and you're entering a default or so on." – <i>Workshop customer</i>
Do the services help customers better understand their specific legal matters?	Self-help center services help customers better understand their specific legal matter to a limited extent.	"[Without the self-help center] I wouldn't know my rights, ...I couldn't defend myself in the court properly, or write down the papers properly, because my education is not that great. So to me I wouldn't have that much of a chance as I did coming here...." – <i>Center customer</i>
How have the services impacted the customers' decisions and actions?	The self-help centers seem to have played a crucial role in allowing people to move forward with their cases.	"That chapter of my life is now closed and I can move forward" – <i>Center customer</i>
What would the customers have done in the absence of the services?	Without the service, most people said they really did not know what they would have done, but that they probably would have continued to delay dealing with the matter.	"I think I probably would have just like set it aside, and just keep on waiting until I had enough money to hire a lawyer." – <i>Center customer</i>
Did the perception of the customer change as a result of the services received from the self-help center?	Customers felt more positively toward the court system as a result of the service, and that the courts were making a real effort to help them.	"[I]t made me have a different outlook on the system, and I really feel like now the courts are really trying to help people. ...they're becoming a little bit more informative, ... giving us other avenues to take." – <i>Workshop customer</i> .
What is the impact of JusticeCorps services on customers' lives, especially with regard to their children?	The JusticeCorps program enables the self-help centers to provide high-quality help to many more customers, allowing them to move on with their lives.	"[W]hen things started going bad, and the fact that I was still married to him, my son ... was very angry and he would lash out at me and argue with me at first. And it's like now.... he's handling things a lot better because he knows mom is doing something to get rid of this horrible person." – <i>Center customer</i>
Do customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully?	Customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully by self-help center staff.	"They treat us with respect. Not like downgrade us by ...what we're capable of doing or not doing, or our situation, you know, or like 'Well, you're not paying anyways' kind of attitude." – <i>Center customer</i>

## **Summary**

Overall, a few themes were particularly clear and consistent across all the groups. These were that unrepresented litigants were coming into the courthouses anxious, frustrated, and often at wits end with trying to move forward with their cases. Once in the centers, they were treated with respect, and a real concern about helping them get their cases resolved. What is more, the staff created a sense of trust in the litigants that their case would be handled properly, and confidence that they were finally moving toward a resolution of the matter. The key to this seemed to be prompt answers to questions, and a willingness to find answers to problems rather than an attitude of 'I don't know, I can't help you.' Finally, JusticeCorps students were seen by litigants and court staff alike as embodying this helpful, problem solving attitude through their enthusiasm, desire to learn, and willingness to be of assistance.