

Chapter 5

Contra Costa County: Technology Model

PROGRAM SNAPSHOT MODEL TYPE: TECHNOLOGY MODEL

Hours:	Web site: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week Workshop: Wednesdays, 2 to 4:30 p.m. Mediation: as needed Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Location:	Administrative office: Martinez Workshop: Broadcast to Walnut Creek courthouse from Martinez Mediation: Martinez Family Law Center
Number of Customers Served:	Web site: Average of over 2,000 visits per month Workshops: 17 between April 21 and June 30, 2004 Mediation: 50 from November 2003 to May 2004
Number of Staff:	One full-time project coordinator One project manager at 20 percent Program utilizes various contractors to complete tasks
Number of Volunteers:	Approximately 14 attorneys, judicial officers, and other court staff review content on a volunteer basis
Case Types Served:	Web site: Guardianship, domestic violence, unlawful detainer Workshops: Dissolution, Custody and visitation Mediation: Custody and visitation
Methods of Service Delivery:	Web site Videoconferencing: Workshops and distance mediation

Background

Contra Costa County, with more than 948,000 residents, is the ninth most populous county in California. One of the nine counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, it covers 720 square miles. The county has a relatively low poverty rate of 8 percent and one of the fastest-growing workforces of all Bay Area counties.^{35,36} Contra Costa County has six court locations in five cities. As of July 2001, the Contra Costa Superior Court had 33 judges, 12 commissioners, and about 389 employees. Contra Costa County ranks in the top quarter of all California counties in terms of total filings.³⁷ In fiscal year 2002-2003, there were:

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Contra Costa County, California QuickFacts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06013.html> (accessed November 18, 2004).

³⁶ Contra Costa County, "About the County," <http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/main.htm> (accessed November 18, 2004).

³⁷ Judicial Council of California, *2004 Court Statistics Report, Statewide Caseload Trends, 1993-1994 Through 2002-2003* (2004).

- more than 9,000 new family law filings (e.g., divorce, custody and visitation, domestic violence);
- nearly 1,500 new probate filings (e.g., guardianships, conservatorships);
- more than 10,000 new limited civil filings (e.g., landlord/tenant and small claims); and
- close to 7,000 new small claims filings.³⁸

As indicated in its extensive legal services directory, Contra Costa County has a wealth of resources both inside and outside the court for individuals seeking legal assistance, the most extensive of which appear to be in the areas of consumer matters, disability, health care, family law, and domestic violence. The major court-based sources of assistance for self-represented litigants are the family law facilitator (which also hosts divorce workshops conducted by pro bono lawyers from the county bar association), the small claims advisor, domestic violence clinics, and court-employed legal technicians who conduct document review for both domestic violence and probate cases. The county bar association is also very active in providing pro bono services, which include in-court assistance with guardianship cases, guardianship workshops, and attorney counseling evenings on a variety of case types. However, the county still faces unmet and underserved legal needs, largely in the areas of family law and probate guardianship.

Litigants may not be able to access the services they need for a variety of reasons. People interviewed during the two site visits to Contra Costa County (hereafter respondents; see Appendix B) were asked about barriers faced by self-represented litigants, and the same barriers were often cited: literacy/education levels, limited English proficiency, transportation and time barriers, and unfamiliarity with legal terms and procedures. Many services are offered for a limited number of hours each week or month or are offered only during daytime hours when individuals may have trouble taking time off of work. Some services are offered only in one court location, and litigants may lack adequate transportation to travel to locations distant from their homes. (Although public transit in many parts of the Bay Area is extensive, the distance between the major cities in Contra Costa County makes travel difficult—even for litigants with private transportation—and public transit options are limited outside of several major transit corridors.) Family law facilitator services are limited to child and spousal support issues, and many other services have income qualifications that are difficult to meet.

Contra Costa's program employs two main strategies to address these needs: the Virtual Self-Help Law Center Web site and videoconferencing. The Web site allows litigants to access information at a time and location most convenient to them. Videoconferencing helps litigants attend legal information workshops at locations more convenient to home or work. It also allows parents to appear for mediation of their child custody and

³⁸ Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS).

visitation disputes at the same time but in different locations, due to domestic violence issues or other concerns.

Description of Model

The Contra Costa County program is substantially different from a traditional self-help center. This pilot project explores how technology—in this case, the Internet and videoconferencing equipment—can be used to meet the needs of self-represented litigants. The Virtual Self-Help Law Center’s Web site provides information in multiple media formats (written, voice only, and video) pertaining to guardianship, domestic violence, and unlawful detainer cases, and it plans to offer information on dissolution and family law orders to show cause, civil, small claims, and traffic cases. It uses videoconferencing equipment to expand the availability of family law workshops and to facilitate child custody mediations between two parents in separate locations when domestic violence issues are a factor.

As the number of people without legal representation has grown, other ways of providing service have been developed such as workshops, which allow one lawyer to provide information to 10 or 20 people at a time. By adding videoconferencing technology, this project enables one lawyer’s workshop to reach beyond the 10 or 20 people on site to participants at remote locations. By recording the workshops and making copies of the tape in several formats (videocassettes, CD-ROMs, DVDs) and giving those copies to public libraries, schools, community centers, one lawyer can now provide information to people in many locations over an extended period of time. When a digital copy of the workshop video is posted on the Web site, one lawyer now provides information to countless people anywhere in the world at any time.

The Web site also displays the lawyer’s core information in text format; provides many tools, such as glossaries, to help people understand their case; answers frequently asked questions; helps self-represented litigants navigate the court process, file and serve court forms, and understand and comply with court orders; and links to numerous other sites with supplemental information. Now, all of the Judicial Council of California’s forms can be filled out online. The Web also makes the translation of information into different languages much easier.

Goals of Program

According to the grant proposal, the goal of the center is to “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.” The proposal outlined the following mechanisms for implementing the center:

- Develop at least six separate workshop programs;

- Acquire and place portable videoconferencing equipment endpoints in Martinez and two branch courts;
- Hire one lawyer and two paralegal assistants to co-facilitate each of the videoconference workshops;
- Write and deliver at least six multimedia training modules that provide instruction about preparing, filing, and serving forms via the Internet and CD-ROM in various public terminals;
- Hold videoconference mediation sessions for self-represented litigants in custody and visitation cases, so that they can meet simultaneously with the mediator but in different locations; and
- Publicize the center through a direct link from the main Contra Costa County court's Web site, public service announcements in local media, and flyers distributed throughout the courts and community-based organizations.

Focus Areas of Law

At the end of the evaluation period, the center's Web site included information for guardianship, domestic violence, and unlawful detainer cases. The program focused first on the guardianship content, which was deployed in September 2003, then moved on to domestic violence in November 2003 and unlawful detainer in April 2004 (see figure 5.1 for more details). Project staff reported that the first content area took somewhat longer to develop because they were simultaneously creating a template that would serve as a model for future sections of the Web site. Once that template was created, the development of other content areas went much more quickly. Content for dissolution will be added in early 2005, and additional sections are planned on family law orders to show cause, civil, small claims, and traffic cases. In addition to these efforts, the center created another program component by filming an instructional workshop for librarians that will be distributed to more than 900 public and law libraries via CD-ROM in early 2005. This material is designed to help libraries with a librarian and a modem learn how to provide information and assistance to self-represented litigants.

**Figure 5.1
Timeline for Deployment of Web Content**

Content Description	Developed	Deployed
Guardianship text	April '03	Sept. '03
Guardianship video	Sept. '03 (Contra Costa Co.)	Sept. '03
Guardianship video	'03 (Solano Co.)	Sept. '03
Welcome videos	Oct. '03	Nov. '03
Domestic violence restraining order text	Sept. '03	Nov. '03
Domestic violence restraining order videos	'02 (AOC)	Sept. '04
User questionnaires	Jan. '04	Feb. '04
Librarians training	Jan. '04	Sept. '04
Unlawful detainer text	Feb. '04	Apr. '04
Show Me/Tell Me links for guardianship	Feb. '04	Feb. '04
Family law videos	'03 (Contra Costa Co. DCSS)	Sep. '04
Divorce	Oct. '04	Jan. '05 (est.)
Divorce videos	Nov. '04	Jan. '05 (est.)
Family law order to show cause	Nov. '04	Jan. '05 (est.)
Court procedures	Dec. '04	Feb. '05 (est.)

Divorce, custody, visitation, and child support are discussed at videoconference workshops conducted in Martinez and broadcast to Walnut Creek. The videoconference mediation option is for parents who have disputes about child custody and visitation and concerns about being in the same room because of domestic violence issues.

Project Planning and Start-up

The Virtual Self-Help Law Center experienced a slower start-up than expected. Respondents said the primary barrier to implementing the project more quickly was difficulty in hiring a project coordinator who would be responsible for the center's daily operations. Most of the planning for the center was done by the program manager with some support from a task force set up to address uses of technology for self-represented litigants. The task force was composed of 15 to 20 individuals, including bench officers, representatives from community organizations, the law librarian, the family law facilitator, clerks, court executives, and pro bono attorneys. An attorney who was initially hired to be the project coordinator left the position within a few weeks. The program had difficulty finding an attorney to fill the project coordinator position and had to expand its recruitment to nonattorneys with project management experience. The current project coordinator began work in early February 2003. The program manager oversees the center and supervises the project coordinator.

Respondents also explained that coordinating the purchase and installment of videoconferencing equipment, as well as securing the services of necessary contractors, took longer than originally expected. According to respondents, a pilot project of this scope—one that required the coordination of various court personnel/departments in different cities (e.g., information technology department, Family Court Services, Office of the Family Law Facilitator) as well as outside service providers (e.g., bar association's pro bono unit, law library)—takes a substantial amount of planning and discussion before tangible services can be provided to the public. Difficulty in finding an appropriate

project coordinator slowed the planning, thus delaying implementation. Individuals interviewed for the evaluation explained that the technical issues (e.g., wiring for videoconferencing equipment, Web site maintenance) that had to be resolved were not in themselves barriers to implementation, but the amount of time and coordination spent planning for the use of the technologies was a challenge, particularly until a full-time project coordinator was hired.

The Virtual Self-Help Law Center’s administrative office is located in the Alternative Dispute Resolution Department in a building next to the main courthouse in Martinez. The office space, however, is not critical to the center’s service delivery model because it serves the public in other venues (Internet, Walnut Creek courthouse, Family Court Services office).

Population Served

Contra Costa County’s Virtual Self-Help Law Center serves customers primarily through a carefully designed Web site. Users view the site from locations all over the world, come to the site for a very wide range of information (whether or not they have a court case), and may be at any stage of exploring or resolving their concerns. Survey data show the site is used not only by parties directly involved in a particular legal matter but also by those who are gathering information on behalf of a friend or relative who may not be comfortable using computers or who has literacy, language, or other access problems. The population served also appears to be well-educated and comfortable using computer resources. The center’s services, staffing, and populations served are described in more detail below.

Method of Obtaining Information from Web Site Visitors

Trying to determine who is being served, and how, is one of the most challenging aspects of evaluating the Virtual Self-Help Law Center, and the research in this area, especially related specifically to Web sites providing legal information, is somewhat limited.

Whereas visitors to a traditional, walk-in self-help center are asked to fill out an intake form, Web site users get a “pop-up” request for basic information about their issues and demographics. Because users can get the information they need whether or not they fill out the forms, only a fraction of the Web site’s visitors responded to the survey.³⁹

Initial questions about collecting data from Web site users appeared simple to answer. With further exploration, however, it became clear that the most common strategy for tracking Web site activity—placing “cookies” on the user’s computer—might present

³⁹ The Virtual Self-Help Law Center Web site provided an opportunity for each user to complete an intake form that collected demographic data, computer use information, and reasons for accessing the site. During the evaluation’s timeframe, 353 individuals chose to complete this form (compared with an average of more than 2,000 visits to the site per month). As a result, the responses described here may not reflect all Web site users. Data are not representative of individuals participating in the Walnut Creek videoconferenced workshops or the individuals participating in distance mediation.

serious safety issues for victims of domestic violence because they provide evidence of the sites users have visited. Victims of domestic violence are often at greatest risk if the perpetrator believes that the victim is planning to leave the relationship or is seeking legal protection. For this reason, the Virtual Self-Help Law Center and AOC staff agreed to use cookies sparingly (they are only placed when someone agrees to fill out and return the site's questionnaire) and anonymously (the cookie refers to a non-court- and non-subject-related entity). To provide an additional measure of protection, the center worked with its Web site developer to create detailed information about how site visitors might erase evidence of the Web sites they visit.

Demographics

Education and income. Individuals who completed pop-up intake forms on Contra Costa's Web site are more educated and have higher incomes than the individuals being served in the three other direct service pilot projects. Almost all users (95 percent) completing an intake form said they have at least a high school diploma or GED, and 40 percent have at least a college degree (see figure 5.2 for more information). These figures are remarkably similar to the general population of Internet users in the United States.⁴⁰ About 59 percent of users have household incomes exceeding \$2,000 per month, somewhat lower than the national figures, which indicate that 67 percent of Internet users have household incomes of \$30,000 a year or more.

Gender and number of children. Two-thirds (66 percent) of Web site users completing intake forms are female, and 70 percent have children under 19 in their households, the majority having one or two children. The general population of Internet users is more likely to be male (50 percent), but users of any particular Web site may vary by the type of information provided on the site (e.g., domestic violence content may be more widely viewed by women than by men).

Ethnicity. About 64 percent of users are white non-Hispanic, with substantial proportions of African American (12 percent) and Hispanic (11 percent) users. The proportion of white non-Hispanics is larger among the general population of Internet users, likely because survey respondents are drawn from a national sample that may not reflect the greater diversity of California, which is the residence of the vast majority of Virtual Self-Help Law Center users. A relatively small proportion (16 percent) of survey respondents speak a language other than English at home, and the majority of these speak Spanish. Accordingly, nearly all customers (98 percent) said they prefer to receive services in English.

⁴⁰ A. Lenhart et al. *The Ever-Shifting Internet Population: A New Look at Internet Access and the Digital Divide* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2003).

Figure 5.2
Web Site User Summary Statistics
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys

	%	N
Gender		
Female	66%	207
Male	34%	109
(missing)		37
Total		353
Race/ethnicity		
African American	12%	40
Asian	6%	19
Hispanic	11%	35
Native American	1%	3
White	64%	206
Other	4%	14
More than one ethnicity	2%	7
(missing)		29
Total		353
Speak a language other than English at home		
Yes	16%	53
No	84%	272
(missing)		28
Total		353
Monthly household income		
\$500 or less	11%	34
\$501-\$1000	8%	23
\$1001-\$1500	11%	33
\$1501-\$2000	12%	36
\$2001-\$2500	10%	31
\$2501 or more	49%	149
(missing)		47
Total		353
Education		
8th grade or less	1%	3
9th to 11th grade	4%	12
High school diploma or GED	17%	53
Some college	38%	119
Associates degree	12%	39
Bachelors degree	18%	55
Graduate degree	11%	33
(missing)		39
Total		353
Number of children*		
None	30%	79
One	27%	69
Two	27%	71
Three or more	16%	41
(missing)		93
Total		353

* Results should be interpreted with caution due to the high number of missing responses. The proportion of Web site users without children may be underestimated because respondents without children may have chosen not to respond to the question.

Other Web Site User Characteristics

Residence. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of survey respondents are from California, and the remaining quarter are from 28 other states (see figure 5.3). Contra Costa County residents account for more than 40 percent of all users and more than half (55 percent) of California users (latter not shown).

**Figure 5.3
Residence of Web Site Users
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys**

	%	N
Contra Costa County	41%	122
Other California county	33%	98
Outside of California	27%	81
(missing or invalid)		52
Total		353

Computer usage. About 77 percent of individuals reported that the computer they were using was at work or home (figure 5.4). Relatively few survey respondents (5 percent) accessed the site from public terminals such as those at libraries, schools, and courts. Largely due to the consistent availability of computers at work and at home, almost all survey respondents (91 percent) reported using the Internet at least a few times a week (figure 5.5). The majority of users reported being *very comfortable* with computers, although notably 13 percent said they were somewhat or not at all comfortable (figure 5.6).

**Figure 5.4
Computer Location
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys**

	%	N
Work	27%	85
Home	50%	156
Friend	14%	43
Public library	4%	14
School	1%	3
Courthouse public terminal	0%	1
Other	4%	11
(missing)		40
Total		353

Figure 5.5
Frequency of Internet Use
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys

	%	N
Every day	72%	224
A few times a week	19%	59
Once a week	5%	15
Once a month	3%	10
Other	1%	4
(missing)		41
Total		353

Figure 5.6
Level of Comfort with Computers
Pop-Up Web Site Surveys

	%	N
Very comfortable	59%	186
Comfortable	27%	84
Somewhat comfortable	12%	39
Not at all comfortable	1%	4
(missing)		40
Total		353

The hypothesis of some individuals interviewed for the evaluation that only computer-savvy individuals would seek assistance from the Web site appears to be confirmed by responses to the online survey (although it is interesting to note that a lack of comfort and proficiency did not discourage 13 percent of site visitors). It is possible, however, that users with lower levels of Internet proficiency may have been less likely to complete the form, which would tend to bias the data toward more experienced users. Some individuals interviewed during site visits consistently expressed concern about the whether the “typical” self-represented litigant could access information via the Web site due to low literacy levels, lack of access to computers, or low levels of comfort with using computers. No systematic study of self-represented litigants and computer usage has been conducted, so it is not possible to assess the extent to which these concerns are valid.

In light of the purported barriers to Internet access, communities across the country are developing programs to increase use of and access to technology among their residents. The Community Technology Centers Program is a federally funded program established

to provide residents of disadvantaged communities access to information technology and training.⁴¹ This program and others like it have opened up the Internet to new audiences, who previously thought they did not have the need or the ability to go online.⁴² As the Virtual Self-Help Law Center continues to develop, it may wish to consider similar strategies to expand the reach of its online services. This is consistent with the vision of the Judicial Council’s Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants, whose statewide recommendations for serving self-represented litigants include encouraging community groups to assist litigants in using self-help Web sites and other technological resources.

Case types of interest. Individuals who accessed the Contra Costa Web site sought information about a variety of case types: 30 percent guardianship, 21 percent family law (other than divorce), 11 percent domestic violence, 9 percent divorce, and 9 percent unlawful detainer (figure 5.7). The remaining 21 percent reported “other” as the case type and specified a variety of issues including general civil, civil harassment, criminal, contract disputes, probate and estate issues, and small claims. The high level of interest in divorce and other family law matters supports the program’s current efforts to develop content on those issues.

Figure 5.7
Case Types of Interest to Web Site Users
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys

	%	N
Divorce	9%	31
Domestic violence	11%	39
Unlawful detainer	9%	33
Guardianship	30%	107
Other family law	21%	74
Other	21%	74
Total		353

Notes: Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could select more than one case type. Case type was not reported by 31 respondents.

Reason for visiting site. Although the target audience for the Web site is self-represented litigants, a large proportion of users do not fall into this category. More than half (58 percent) of users completing intake forms reported they were representing themselves in a legal matter. Another 14 percent were researching general legal issues, perhaps indicating an expectation that they may become involved in a court case (for example, a

⁴¹ United States Department of Education, Community Technology Centers program description, <http://www.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/AdultEd/CTC/index.html> (accessed November 18, 2004).

⁴² R. Pinkett, Nonprofit Technology Assistance Project, *Trends in Internet use: Online Engagement of Underserved Communities* (November 4, 2004).

landlord or tenant may be researching what happens if rent remains unpaid, or a victim of domestic violence may be learning about how to get protection from further abuse, or a spouse may be researching the process of getting a divorce). About 11 percent of the Web site’s survey respondents reported being a friend or relative of someone who has legal questions, perhaps indicating efforts to overcome unfamiliarity with computer usage, low literacy, or a lack of proficiency in English (figure 5.8). Those users who were visiting the site on someone else’s behalf probably completed the intake survey about themselves, not the people they were helping, so intake survey data may not be capturing the characteristics of people who are not directly using but nevertheless benefiting from the site and who may not have the profile of the typical Internet user.

Figure 5.8
Reason for Visiting Web Site
Pop-Up Web Site User Surveys

	%	N
Representing yourself in a legal matter	58%	203
Friend or relative of someone who has legal questions	11%	40
Lawyer or work for a lawyer	5%	16
Researching general legal issues	14%	50
Self-help center staff	3%	10
Library staff	0%	1
Other	5%	18
Total		353

Notes: Percentages do not sum to 100 because respondents could select more than one answer. Information was not reported by 30 respondents.

Service Staffing

Paid Personnel

The Virtual Self-Help Law Center employs one full-time project coordinator who is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the program. The project manager, who oversees the project, works on the project about one day a week and does not charge a significant percentage of her time to this grant.

Respondents interviewed during site visits spoke highly of the project coordinator and project manager. The project manager was instrumental in writing the grant proposal and getting the project started. Several individuals interviewed explained that she is skilled at negotiating with the court leadership to move the program forward; that she was instrumental in hiring consultants to supplement knowledge and skills available within the court; and that, along with a consistent vision of the project, she has an understanding

of the practical tasks required to bring it to fruition. The project manager supervises the project coordinator, and both are located in the same office.

According to respondents, finding an appropriate person for the project coordinator position was difficult, which delayed project implementation for several months. An attorney was hired but remained in the position for only three weeks. Because the program was having difficulty recruiting attorney candidates for the position, it expanded its recruitment to nonattorneys. The current project coordinator began work in February 2003, and respondents spoke highly of her skills, particularly her ability to coordinate numerous project components effectively. She is not an attorney, and respondents asserted that this is often an asset, particularly when she is editing the expert legal content for the Web site to make sure it uses plain English. Her background as an author and editor is a very good fit for this component of the project, and her experience in public relations should make a significant contribution to advertising and other means of raising awareness of the program. She is also skilled at communicating with the various contractors and court employees involved with the project.

Contractors

The project uses several contractors for work on the Web site, as seen in figure 5.9. Respondents asserted that the extensive use of contractors, a new experience for this court, has been a resounding success. It was important for the court to recognize the skills and knowledge it possessed internally, they said, and the skills and knowledge that needed to come from an outside source. Respondents reported that using consultants was an efficient way to ensure that the project has the most appropriate and qualified people to implement its vision.

**Figure 5.9
Contractors Used for Virtual Self-Help Law Center**

Contribution	Dates
Content designer (attorney)	February, May 2003
Web developer	July 2003 to present
Web designer	July to August 2003
Web host provider	September 2003 to present
Digitalizing guardianship tapes	September 2003
Promotional material	October to November 2003
Taping and production of welcome videos	October to November 2003
Spanish translation of welcome video	October 2003
Digitalizing domestic violence tapes	October to December 2003
Digital graphics	December 2003 to January 2004
Taping and production of librarian training	January to February 2004
Streaming video Web host	April 2004 to present
Digitalizing family law videos	August 2004
Promotional ball point pens	September 2004
Content editing	September to December 2004
Writing scripts for family law videos	September to December 2004
Taping and production of family law videos	November to December 2004
Animation of forms instruction videos	December 2004
Digital photographs for virtual tour	November 2004

The Web site developer has worked closely with the project coordinator and has been involved continuously since the early design phase. Her company focuses on nonprofits' information technology needs, and individuals interviewed during site visits said she has been a crucial member of the team, in part because of her understanding of the center's vision and goals, as well as her technological skills and appreciation of the need to ensure the site meets the requirements of section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendment of 1973 to assist vision-impaired visitors.

Volunteers

Contra Costa's project uses volunteer experts to review content for its Web site, including judicial officers, family law facilitator staff, clerks, and other court employees, as well as attorneys from the bar association's pro bono unit. Program staff estimate that between October 2003 and November 2004, 14 people were asked to review content on a volunteer basis, and at least 75 hours of time were donated.

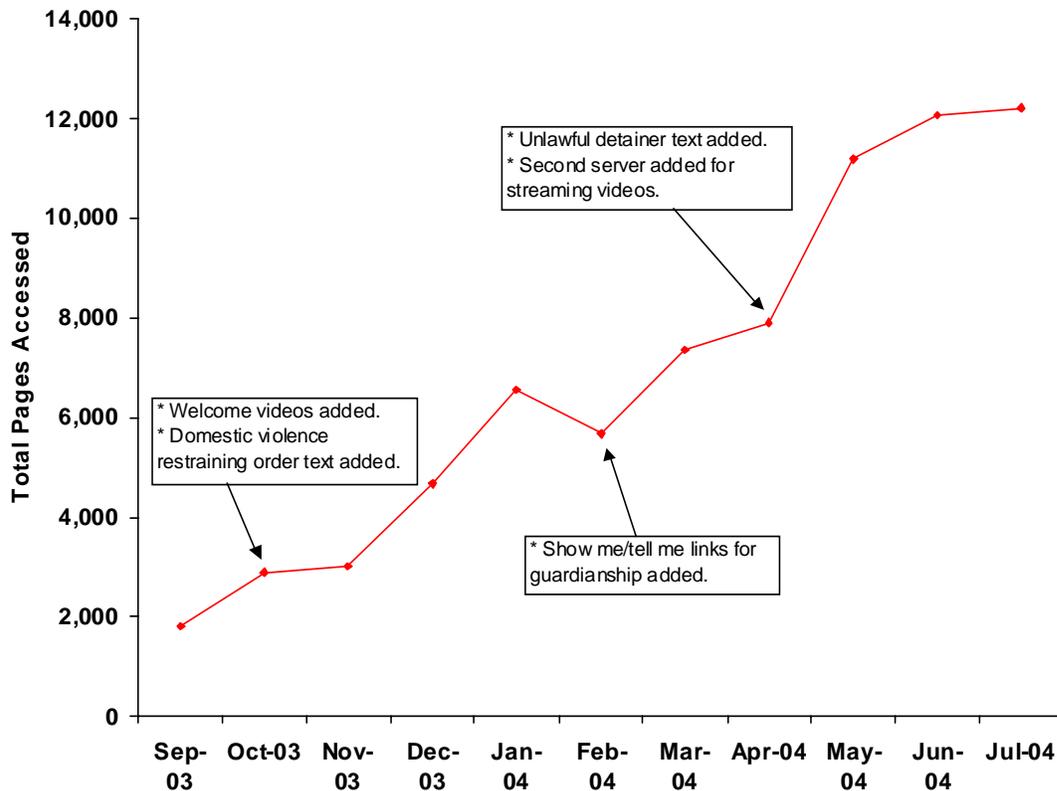
The county bar association's pro bono unit is very active in providing information and assistance to self-represented litigants, primarily via workshops (discussed in more detail

in a later section). Volunteer attorneys conduct dissolution workshops each Wednesday in Martinez, and the self-help center began to videoconference these to Walnut Creek in April 2004. In addition, films of pro bono attorneys explaining instructions or court procedures will be included on the Web site. As time goes on, the center will rely on volunteers to assist remote workshop attendees in Walnut Creek and other branch court locations.

Analysis of Web Site Usage

Usage of the Virtual Self-Help Law Center has more or less steadily increased since the site was launched, with a noticeable jump in the number of pages accessed after the addition of the unlawful detainer content and a second server for streaming video (see figure 5.10). The site is much more commonly accessed on weekdays than on weekends (about 17 percent of visits occurred on Saturday or Sunday). Peak usage tends to be during business hours (57 percent of visits are between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.), when users who work outside of the home might not otherwise be able to travel to the court for services. However, there are a considerable number of visits during the evening hours as well.

Figure 5.10
Usage of Virtual Self-Help Law Center
Dream Host Web Site Usage Statistics



Intensity of Web Site Usage

The average length of a visit to the Web site is about three minutes, with a great majority of users (70 percent) staying on the site for a minute or less. This finding is consistent with some indications that the site does not yet have the information for which many people are looking. However, if information is available on the specific area of law the user is interested in, the user tended to stay on the site longer than average, with the longest visits regarding domestic violence and unlawful detainer content (see figure 5.11).

Figure 5.11
Length of Web Site Visits
NetTracker Web Site Usage Statistics

Content Area	Average Length of Visit	Percentage Staying One Minute or Less
All	3 minutes, 7 seconds	70%
Guardianship	4 minutes, 34 seconds	58%
Domestic violence	5 minutes, 1 second	57%
Unlawful detainer	4 minutes, 59 seconds	55%

Nearly three-quarters of visitors to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center (73 percent) viewed one or two pages during their visit, and only about 5 percent viewed 10 or more pages (see figure 5.12). Consistent with the findings regarding visit duration, users who visited specific content areas visited a larger number of pages than average, with 10 percent of visitors to the guardianship section viewing 10 or more pages and 12 percent of visitors to the domestic violence and unlawful detainer sections viewing 10 or more pages. Roughly 15 percent of visits were from repeat visitors.

Figure 5.12
Number of Pages Viewed
NetTracker Web Site Usage Statistics

Content Area	Average Number of Page Views	Percentage Viewing Two Pages or Less Per Visit
All	2.8	73%
Guardianship	4.0	60%
Domestic violence	4.3	58%
Unlawful detainer	4.3	56%

Analysis of Pages and File Types Accessed

The most commonly visited pages were the home page (29 percent of visits), glossary (14 percent), and list of forms and instructions for guardianship (7 percent). In terms of specific legal content areas, guardianship pages were the most frequently viewed (24 percent of visits), followed by domestic violence and unlawful detainer (both 14 percent).

It is noteworthy that the content area that has been on the site the longest is that which is most viewed by visitors.

Among the more intense users of the site—those who stayed on the site for more than 15 minutes and repeat visitors—the most commonly viewed pages were largely the same as for all users, with the home page and the glossary being the most commonly viewed pages, followed by the guardianship index and list of guardianship forms and instructions, then by the unlawful detainer index and help with unlawful detainer forms.

PDF files were accessed in nearly one-third (30 percent) of visits. The most commonly accessed PDF files were related to court forms and included the consent of proposed guardian/nomination of guardian/consent to appointment of guardian/waiver of notice forms; help files for domestic violence custody, visitation, and support requests; the confidential guardian screening form; and the civil case cover sheet.

Video files were viewed in 8 percent of visits and audio files in 2 percent. Most video files accessed were RealMedia Player files, and most audio files were .wav files. The most commonly viewed video files were the welcome messages from the presiding judge and clerk, followed by guardianship information. These videos have been on the site longest. Audio files accessed were mainly information about the guardianship process.

Entry and exit pages. The largest proportion of visitors (26 percent) entered the site from the home page, followed by the glossary (10 percent) (see figure 5.13). In terms of the specific legal content areas, guardianship content was the most common entry point, accounting for 5 of 15 of the top entry pages (a page accounting for at least 1 percent of all visits).

Figure 5.13
Common Entry Pages
NetTracker Web Site Usage Statistics

Entry Page	Percentage of Visits
Home page	26%
Glossary	10%
Guardianship FAQs: Becoming a guardian	4%
Guardianship FAQs: Going to court	3%
Guardianship: List of forms and instructions	3%

The home page (17 percent of visits) was also the most common exit page, which may in part be explained by the large proportion of visitors who did not stay on the site or stayed for only a short amount of time (see figure 5.14). The glossary was the next most common exit page, accounting for 10 percent of visits. Because this is also one of the major entry pages, it may be that people spend a short amount of time on the site to get definitions of legal terminology, but have no need for further information or cannot find the additional information they need. Of the top 18 exit pages (pages accounting for at

least 1 percent of all visits), subject matter was fairly evenly spread among guardianship, domestic violence, general information, and unlawful detainer. The only non-HTML file among the top exit pages was the help file for domestic violence custody, visitation, and support requests.

Figure 5.14
Common Exit Pages
NetTracker Web Site Usage Statistics

Exit Page	Percentage of Visits
Home page	17%
Glossary	10%
Guardianship: List of forms and instructions	3%
Guardianship FAQs: Becoming a guardian	3%
Guardianship FAQs: Going to court	2%

Pages viewed by intake survey respondents. Users who responded to the pop-up intake survey had the same general profile as all users in terms of the content they viewed. The pages receiving the largest number of views by survey respondents were the home page, glossary, list of guardianship forms and instructions, and guardianship index. Notably, however, users who completed surveys were more likely than average users to view the welcome video from the presiding judge, largely due to the fact that the survey popped up only when specific sections of the site were accessed, such as the videos and the glossary.

Keyword searches. According to analysis of the top 10 keyword searches per week for a period of 41 weeks, visitors to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center were seeking information on a variety of issues ranging from family law to probate to criminal and other civil matters (see figure 5.15). (Individual keyword entries varied greatly but were categorized into several major topic areas.) Users most often sought information on divorce and related issues such as child custody and visitation, child support, and spousal support, followed by criminal and traffic matters and issues related to probate, estates, and wills. It is notable that the Web site currently offers information on only one of these topics. However, the high level of interest in divorce and related issues supports the program’s decision to roll out divorce content as its next subject area.

Figure 5.15
Common Keyword Searches Used
Atomz Keyword Search Reports

Topic	Percentage of Appearances in Top 10 Searches
Divorce	9%
Criminal/traffic	9%
Child custody and visitation, child support, and spousal support	8%
Probate/estates/wills	8%
Name change	5%
Landlord/tenant	5%

Language of Service Provision

The Web site is in English, although it does have a welcome message from a clerk in Spanish and links to the AOC’s self-help Web site for self-help information in Spanish. It also will link to the information on the Web site of the Centro de Recursos Legales in Fresno County when that becomes available.

Description of Service Delivery

The Contra Costa center provides services through its Web site, workshops, videoconferenced mediation, and public librarian training. Each is described in more detail below.

Internet/E-mail Services

The Contra Costa program’s primary focus has been the development of a user-friendly and informative self-help Web site (www.cc-courthelp.org). It has information on guardianship, domestic violence, dissolution, and landlord/tenant cases, using text, video, and audio to convey information. The site was designed with input from numerous individuals, including court staff, a content designer, a Web site designer, and a Web site development contractor. The site went live on September 30, 2003, and had a million hits in its first year.

Providing information on the Internet is very different from providing information at a physical self-help center. When visitors walk into a physical center, service providers can work with them to understand their needs and to assess their capacity to take in information. More important, service providers can reasonably expect that the customer is currently in that jurisdiction, has some type of legal problem, and has decided to do something about it. When a person links onto an Internet site, these assumptions become less relevant, as anyone can access the information from any Internet-ready computer.

Accordingly, the center hired a content designer to assist with developing a look, feel, and functionality that would meet the needs of adult learners, many of whom may be

challenged by literacy or other issues. Respondents interviewed during site visits explained that the hiring of this content designer was a critical component of the process. Recognizing that a significant percentage of site visitors would come from elsewhere in the state and country, program staff and their consultants realized that the information posted to the site must be written for a diverse audience. To address these realities, jurisdictional information is repeated clearly and often, there is an extensive glossary, and considerable attention is paid to generating and maintaining a “frequently asked questions” section. Because site visitors might be at any stage of their case (or not yet have a court case), each section needs to be presented in manageable chunks so that visitors can get just the information they need. Because many with legal needs have related concerns, the site provides an extensive array of information about allied agencies, organizations, and resources. To accommodate the wide range of learning styles, the site makes extensive use of graphics, photographs, and videos to supplement the written text.

Besides the content designer, the center hired a Web site developer, who was critical to the project’s success. In consultation with the content designer, the Web site developer created an architecture that would facilitate access to the extensive information available while accommodating those who may browse the site with or without a mouse or require other accommodations to meet vision or physical challenges (the site meets the requirements of section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendment of 1973). To ensure the site’s durability, the Web designer hand-coded all pages to be viewed by all major Web browsers⁴³ and worked with content developers to ensure each video or audio element was available in several media formats and could be accessed at varying connection speeds. Perhaps her most significant contribution, however, was her ability to develop ways to collect site statistics without compromising the safety of any visitor.

As the general layout and structure of the site were being decided, the project worked on developing the expert legal content required. The content for the site was developed through a time-consuming process that involved several individuals, both paid and volunteer. The goal was to develop content that was in accessible English⁴⁴ and to structure the site in a way that would allow users to find information quickly. Licensed attorneys in the Office of the Family Law Facilitator wrote the first draft of each content package.⁴⁵ This content includes explanations of the court process for different case types

⁴³ The Web developer did not use one of the off-the-shelf Web publishing packages, known to contain bugs. Hand-coding allowed her to develop an architecture customized to the site’s content, which has an internal logic that matches the structure of the site and facilitates making changes to the site and updating content.

⁴⁴ Accessible or plain English text refers to text that is easy to understand and read for individuals with average levels of literacy; for the average native-English-speaking American, this is the fifth-grade level. For more information please refer to the Transcend Web site: <http://www.transcend.net/at/index.html>.

⁴⁵ Attorneys from the Office of the Family Law Facilitator were among the attorneys on contract, separate from AB 1058 funding and outside of the scope of their roles as facilitators, to develop content for the Web site. The advantage of using facilitators rather than other contract attorneys is that they are familiar with the needs of the local population and the types of issues they present.

and instructions for completing forms. Once the initial drafts of each component were written, they were edited into more understandable English by the project coordinator. The project manager, bench officers, court clerks, and independent attorneys then reviewed these documents to make sure the content was accurate and understandable. Separate line-by-line instructions for each of the Judicial Council's forms are written typically to a sixth to eighth grade reading level.

A growing number of videos available on the site offer information on family law, guardianships, and domestic violence. The site's home page contains welcome messages from the presiding judge and the court executive officer and brief introductions to the court by a clerk (in English and Spanish) (see figure 5.16). Some of the videos are stories, with people acting out case situations, while others are tapes or workshops on form preparation. The "show me/tell me" feature links video and audio clips with specific written information. In addition to accommodating various learning styles, these materials provide concrete help for those with lower literacy levels. Respondents asserted that the availability of these audio/video links is very innovative and has the potential to further increase a user's understanding of the concepts, particularly for those users who may not effectively process information via written text or those struggling with literacy issues. In fact, one of the user test-subjects noted that the videos were very helpful because they provided the kind of information she needed and walked her through the process.

One initial obstacle in fully using these components was the extremely large size of the video and audio files, which take a prohibitively long time to download and view. This problem was solved by moving the videos to a streaming video Web host. In addition, the center is experimenting with other ways to offer legal information effectively on the Web site, such as PowerPoint presentations and Flash technology.

Figure 5.16
Virtual Self-Help Law Center Home Page

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Virtual Self-Help Law Center. At the top, there is a header with the Superior Court of California logo and the text "Superior Court of California County of Contra Costa". Below this is a navigation bar with links: HOME | ABOUT THIS SITE | VIDEO ROOM | GLOSSARY | MORE INFO | CONTACT US, and the date 12/22/2004. On the left side, there is a "CASE INFORMATION" sidebar with a search bar and a "Search" button. The main content area has a heading "Welcome to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center" and a paragraph stating the site's goal. It also includes a disclaimer: "This site does not give legal advice." and a "Please Note" section. At the bottom of the main content area, there are three icons representing Guardianship, Domestic Violence, and Landlord/Tenant. The footer contains the mission statement and navigation links.

Superior Court of California
County of Contra Costa

HOME | ABOUT THIS SITE | VIDEO ROOM | GLOSSARY | MORE INFO | CONTACT US 12/22/2004

CASE INFORMATION

Guardianship
Domestic Violence
Landlord/Tenant

enter keywords
Search ▶

Welcome to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center

Our goal is to provide information that will make it easier for you to handle your court case, whether you have a lawyer or not.

This site can help you understand what happens at court. You can learn about court procedures, find forms, and links to other important resources.

This site does not give legal advice.
If you believe you need a lawyer, or legal help, go to: [California Court's Self-Help Center](#).

Please Note: People can tell what Internet sites you've visited on your computer. Be safe! If the information you need is sensitive to your situation, use the Internet at a local library, a friend's house, or at work. If you do use your own computer, you can [clear it after your visit following our directions](#).

Guardianship
Domestic Violence
Landlord/Tenant

Last updated: 09/25/2004
You are here: VSHLC Home

Our Mission: To provide justice under the law, equally, impartially and expeditiously, with dignity and respect for all.

In This Site: Home | About Us | Video Room | Glossary | More Info | Contact Us | Site Map
Case Information: Guardianship | Domestic Violence | Landlord/Tenant

Many similar Web sites provide legal information (at greater and lesser degrees of detail) about different types of court cases and how to follow particular court procedures. According to respondents, this Web site is unique in providing information that could be useful to users before they decide to start a legal proceeding, as well as information that could help users know how to implement court orders they receive and how to make changes if their situation changes. The site is also unusual in providing steps to follow during a legal proceeding for all of the parties involved in a case type. For example, the guardianship content package includes information written especially for parents whose children are the subject of the guardianship proceeding and for the children about whom

the proceedings are convened. The domestic violence content package provides comprehensive information about the more commonly associated actions in these cases, as well as information geared specifically to address the unique needs and perspectives of each of the parties and protected persons in these proceedings. A few respondents felt it was crucial that users not get lost on the site, and to this end, the center's content developers have striven to ensure the user is never more than "two clicks away" from any piece of information. Although most respondents who saw the Web site said it provided useful information, many also expressed concern that self-represented litigants with very low literacy, English language, or computer skills would have limited access to this information.

The Contra Costa Superior Court's main Web site provides a link to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center, and the California Courts Web site links to its videos. This has the dual benefit of expanding access to the Contra Costa Web site for individuals who otherwise might not seek it out and broadening the information that can be provided from other Web sites anywhere in California without having to develop new content. In addition, staff of the other pilot programs mentioned that they regularly refer litigants to the instructions for clearing the history of sites they visited from the computer, information that is especially helpful for victims of domestic violence, who might not want to leave evidence of the Web sites they visited. Probono.net, a nonprofit organization that explores the use of technology and volunteer lawyer participation to increase access to justice, also links to this information.

Workshops

The original goal (as outlined in the proposal) was for the self-help center to develop at least six workshop programs to help self-represented litigants complete, file, and serve court forms; understand how to handle cases; and implement court orders. Each workshop was to have interactive access to the instructor (via videoconferencing equipment) and to a co-facilitator on site. Videoconference workshops attempt to address transportation barriers faced by Contra Costa residents. Respondents explained that people often have a difficult time attending workshops in Martinez if they live or work in another part of the county because of inadequate public transportation in many areas and the high level of traffic between the main county population centers.

To implement the workshop goals, Contra Costa County used the AOC grant to help the court purchase videoconferencing equipment to expand the capacity of workshops already being provided by the local bar association. In April 2004, the center began videoconferencing the dissolution workshops offered in Martinez by the bar association. The new endpoint was in the Walnut Creek branch court.

Data from respondents and workshop forms completed by the project coordinator indicate that 15 to 25 people usually attend the workshop in Martinez. Workshop forms completed by the project coordinator (10 between April and June 2004) showed one or two attendees each week in Walnut Creek. Many of those attending in Walnut Creek told

the project coordinator they would have been unable to attend the workshop in Martinez due to work or family schedules. The workshops are offered Wednesday afternoons from 2 to 4:30 p.m., and the topic alternates among three topics in the workshop series: The first week is finishing a divorce, the second and fourth weeks cover order to show cause (custody, visitation, child/spousal support, etc.), and the third week is starting a divorce.

Instruction at the workshops is provided verbally, using forms projected onto large screens as visual aids. It focuses on filling out forms as well as providing procedural information. Workshops are structured around three forms packets provided at the clerk's office: initial dissolution, order to show cause, and final judgment. In addition to the forms themselves, the packets contain detailed instructions on how to complete, file, and serve the forms, as well as information on other resources available to litigants. Participants do not actually fill out forms during the workshop;⁴⁶ they learn how to fill out each form and why, but they are told to take the forms home and fill them out there. The workshop leader usually asks participants a few questions about their cases and then spends time on the forms the group is most likely to need. Not all forms are covered in all workshops. The workshop leaders encourage questions throughout the presentation and are sometimes available to meet with participants one-on-one at the end of the workshop. Follow-up assistance is offered through the family law facilitator (for visitation and child support issues) and through the county bar association's program of attorney counseling evenings. Participants are also provided with a packet of *pro per* resources containing referrals to books, Web sites, and other resources.

The center partnered with other court programs to purchase the full complement of videoconference equipment envisioned by the original grant proposal. By leveraging the resources allocated under this grant with those available through the complex litigation program, the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, and the video arraignment project, the center was able to gain access to high-quality equipment in five court locations. Because this partnership required extensive coordination and encountered several technical difficulties (installation of cabling, securing the equipment in public locations, and assuring high-quality transmission), use of the videoconferencing equipment was delayed for several months.

The center's original plan was to hire one lawyer and two paralegal assistants to co-facilitate each of the workshops. Because the costs of developing the Web site and preparing content were larger than originally anticipated, the center decided to rely on volunteers to co-facilitate workshops that were already ongoing in the court. (Court clerks were also considered as workshop assistants, but due to budget constraints and increasing workloads, they could not be made available.) Unfortunately, establishing a volunteer corps also proved more challenging than originally anticipated. To make the workshops available in at least one remote location, the project coordinator took on the co-facilitator role. The self-help center and court have hired a contractor to help them

⁴⁶ This is an important feature that distinguishes the Contra Costa County workshops from those in the other programs.

develop a volunteer program that will enable litigants to attend workshops in multiple remote locations. Beginning in early 2005, volunteers are expected to be available to co-facilitate workshops in these other locations.

Child Custody Distance Mediation

The Virtual Self-Help Law Center contributed grant money toward the purchase of videoconferencing equipment to help Family Court Services conduct mediations simultaneously with two parents in different locations. Equipment is installed in Martinez, Richmond, Pittsburg, and Walnut Creek. Individuals interviewed for the evaluation explain that the original plan was to allow mediators to work simultaneously with parents who are in different cities, but because the pilot grant did not provide money to pay for extra staff, this service was offered only in the Martinez Family Law Center. Each parent is situated in a separate room, and the mediator spends half of his or her time with one party and the other half with the second parent. Respondents said this arrangement helps protect the safety and well-being of parents and saves valuable staff time that would be spent meeting at different times with each parent.

According to quarterly reports, 50 mediations were conducted via videoconference between November 2003 and May 2004. This far exceeds the program's initial goal of holding 25 videoconference mediation sessions per year. About 37 percent of mediations conducted at separate times led to agreement during that period, compared with 59 percent of mediations by videoconference. Prior to the availability of videoconferenced mediation, the agreement rate for separate mediations was about 24 percent.

Public Librarian Training

The Contra Costa County program coordinated the taping and production of a video in which a law librarian explains how colleagues can help the public find legal information on the Internet. The video was put onto the Contra Costa Web site under a special section for librarians, and the center has distributed more than 100 CD ROMs with the video nationwide. According to respondents, more copies are being made, and the goal is to offer training to every public librarian in California on how to help people find legal information online.

Program Developments Since Last Site Visit

The center has completed a major restructuring of the Web site that includes new navigational tools and graphics. According to program staff, the original site went up with an architectural flaw due to problems communicating with the Web designer, a lesson that was learned in the context of different languages used by technical and nontechnical professions. The main Contra Costa Superior Court Web site is also being redesigned based on what program staff have learned from the design of the Virtual Self-Help Law Center.

Based in part on requests from the site users as expressed through the search function and in part on needs identified by court personnel, plans are being made to add content

sections for traffic and small claims in the coming months, in addition to the family law content that is currently being developed and reviewed. More videos are being digitized so they can be added to the site, and a forms instruction animation project is well under way. Program staff are planning to add photographs to the site that will illustrate each step in the court process, along with a virtual tour of the courthouse, which should help to address the needs of visual learners.

There are plans to set up work stations for litigants at the Martinez Family Law Center. These work stations will include computers with access to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center. As the subject matter offerings of the site expand and as access to the site increases through such public terminals, it is expected that the number of visits to the site will increase, the duration of visits will increase, and the profile of individuals accessing the site will change.

A large media campaign will be launched to promote the Web site as soon as the divorce and related content are up. Posters publicizing the Web site are being placed in additional court facilities, flyers and bookmarks are being handed out, and the ballpoint pens are being given away. In addition, program staff developed a brochure that lists libraries where the public can access the Internet and specific Web sites where legal information can be found. All of these efforts should help to increase awareness of and referrals to the site.

While the advantages of expanding the reach of existing services through videoconferencing are clear, program staff expressed concern about the inconsistency in the nature and quality of the workshops across presenters. In an effort to address this concern, program staff are partnering with Contra Costa TV to film the workshops. That way, the approved content can be presented, and then the facilitator can stop the video after each segment to address questions from participants.

There are plans to expand the videoconferencing of workshops to other locations, as well as to develop other workshop programs that can be broadcast to remote locations, making them accessible to more self-represented litigants. The program is considering partnerships with noncourt entities (such as the Department of Child Support Services), but these partnerships may be more difficult to establish because of different technology infrastructures. In addition, the program is actively seeking opportunities to get volunteers to staff the videoconference workshops and has made a recent contract with the Contra Costa sheriff's volunteer program.

Budget and Expenditures

In the first grant year (fiscal year 2001-2002), almost all of the program's budget went to operating expenditures, primarily for equipment and labor related to the initial setup of the videoconferencing equipment, at a cost of around \$79,000. The program's proposal notes that because the court was already in the initial stages of establishing the infrastructure for this technology, incremental costs for additional endpoints would be

greatly reduced. Personnel accounted for only 5 percent of the first year's expenditures, in part due to the technology-heavy start-up costs for a program such as this and in part due to the difficulties in hiring the project coordinator.

In the second and third grant years, about half of the funds were spent on personnel and half on operating expenses. By the second year, the project coordinator had been hired and was becoming much more involved in developing content for the site and working with volunteers and contractors. In Year 2, about two-thirds (65 percent) of the operating expenses were related to videoconferencing equipment and other technology, with the remaining third going to the contractors and consultants who worked on Web design and development as well as content for the site. In Year 3, the vast majority (80 percent) of operating expenses went to contractors and consultants, mostly for Web development, video production, and photography for the Web site.

Collaboration and Outreach

Collaboration Within the Courts

The Contra Costa County program has worked closely with the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, the information technology department, and family court services staff (who conduct the distance mediation sessions), as well as other individuals in various departments across the court. Collaborators have been involved with the design and review of Web site content, the technological infrastructure for the Web site, and the purchase and use of videoconferencing equipment.

To develop the Web site content, the program contracted with three attorneys from the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, each of whom worked part-time to help develop related family law content.⁴⁷ Respondents explained that it is crucial to have people creating content who understand both the legal concepts and the barriers faced by many self-represented litigants, including literacy, education, time, and the level of crisis many face. Attorneys from the Office of the Family Law Facilitator work daily with this population and brought that experience to the content development. This arrangement highlights another aspect of the center that respondents often mentioned, which is the leveraging of funding and expertise.

The information technology department contributed staff time and expertise to the pilot project. There was collaboration and coordination between the self-help center staff and the information technology department to plan for the site's launch in September 2003. Individuals interviewed said that the current director of information technology was instrumental in this collaboration because she was supportive of the goals of the center and prioritized its needs. Her department has been involved in several aspects of the pilot project, including taping and digitizing the guardian workshop for use on the Web site, researching and contracting with Web hosts for the Web site and its videos, and installing

⁴⁷ As previously mentioned, attorneys from the family law facilitator did this work under separate contract from their AB 1058 responsibilities.

and maintaining the videoconferencing equipment. The grant does not contribute money toward salaries in the information technology department, which has faced a challenge due to the staff's increased workload.

Some respondents noted that due to constraints on the way in which the court could spend the grant money, the court has had to absorb some of the infrastructure and implementation costs (e.g., information technology staff time). In addition, a few respondents noted some resentment from court staff about the center's ability to hire a new full-time employee when there is a 20 percent vacancy rate in the court, and employees trying to provide core services are stretched.

Although the development of the Web site was a collaborative process with some court departments, respondents some court staff lack information about the Web site and its services. Several respondents asserted that most court clerks, bench officers, and other employees working directly with the public either are not aware of the Web site at all or are unaware of what it makes available. As a result, most respondents asserted that court employees are not routinely referring self-represented litigants to the Web site, despite the distribution of posters, flyers and bookmarks throughout the court system. The fact that court clerks do not have Internet access may have affected awareness of the site, in that the clerks could not see for themselves what the site offered and how it might be useful to the public they serve. Later, the clerks were given ballpoint pens with the Web site address, which they could hand out to the public. This solves one of the clerks' biggest frustrations—being asked for a pen—and at the same time gets the Virtual Self-Help Law Center's Web site address to the people who need it most.

Collaboration and Public Relations Outside the Courts

The Pro Bono Committee of the Contra Costa County Bar Association has been a major collaborator on this project. Attorneys have volunteered time to review legal content and explain procedures and instructions on videotape for use on the Web site, and they also agreed to videoconferencing the regular family law workshops to increase capacity. According to those interviewed during site visits, the pro bono committee is very active in Contra Costa County and assists self-represented litigants in a variety of ways. These include guardianship workshops once a month, attorney counseling evenings twice a month on different topics, family law workshops every Wednesday afternoon, and workshops on unlawful detainer and consumer law at the community college's self-help center. The pro bono committee also sends attorneys to the guardianship calendars every Wednesday and Friday to help self-represented litigants with their cases. In addition, the bar association provided a one-time grant for the development of a self-reliant agency of pro bono coordinators who refer customers to the available self-help resources.

Respondents reported that center staff members also have worked with the law librarian to compile materials for self-represented litigants, develop written standards for materials linked to the Web site, and facilitate the taping of training for public librarians regarding ways to help people access legal information online, as described above.

To educate the county at large about its services, the program developed posters, bookmarks, and flyers. These are available in the Family Law Center (where family law cases are heard and where court services targeted to families are located), the law library, branch court facilities, and the probate examiner's office. The Web site address is also listed on several packets of forms available at the court and on the ballpoint pens the court clerks give out to the public. The workshops are publicized by the pro bono committee via flyers distributed at the Family Law Center, clerks' offices, law library, and other community service providers. However, most respondents expressed concern over program awareness within and outside of the court. Several individuals asserted that improving public and court employee awareness of the Web site and videoconferencing workshops is the biggest challenge facing the self-help center. A large publicity campaign, coordinated with the county's Department of Child Support Services, is planned as soon as the divorce section and related content are up on the Web site. A few respondents suggested additional populations to target with publicity: (1) police, who give out domestic violence packets and frequently come in contact with individuals who need assistance with forms or court procedure, and (2) the Department of Social Services, which often refers individuals to the probate court to seek guardianship.

Impact on Litigants

Views of Court Personnel and Other Stakeholders

The impact of the Web site on litigants remains unclear and may be difficult to assess, given the other services available to Contra Costa County litigants, as well as the anonymous nature of Web site usage. Of those interviewed for this evaluation, many who are familiar with the Web site asserted that it will be beneficial for individuals because of the completeness, accessibility, and organization of the information. Respondents pointed out that no single model can be the mechanism for meeting every self-represented litigant's needs but that the Web site is an avenue for sharing information that is cost-efficient and always available. Another positive impact mentioned is that the Web site helps make the legal world "more open and less mystifying" for those who are comfortable with written materials. On the other hand, many respondents expressed concern about the Web site's ability to help self-represented litigants who have issues with literacy and computer expertise.

Several individuals interviewed suggested that the Web site would be more useful if computer terminals were available in the court or close to it (e.g., in the law library), where visitors in court to attend a proceeding or to pick up forms could use them. Respondents also recommended that volunteers or other staff be available to assist people with getting online and finding information. The center hopes to implement this component, once the court's volunteer program is functional.

The availability of family law workshops in Walnut Creek is a positive development for self-represented litigants, and respondents expected that the numbers served will increase as more people learn about the workshops.

Views of Customers

User testing for the guardianship content was done on the first version of the Web site, before its basic architecture was restructured. Not surprisingly, results revealed that the site had some potential to assist litigants but needed refinement in terms of both content and the way it was used to assist people. Overall, people who were more experienced Internet users seemed to have an easier time navigating the site, but they still faced some challenges. Due to difficulties in navigation, lack of understanding of terminology, and lack of awareness about the kind of information they should be seeking, users sometimes could not find the information they required. Many were simply seeking forms and were not interested in the other content offered on the site, even though it may have been an advantage for them to review it, especially for assessing the status of their cases. This may be the outcome of soliciting test-users from the clerk's window, where they presumably went primarily to pick up forms.

User testing indicated that litigants would benefit from personal assistance to complement their use of the site. Users commonly needed assistance triaging their cases—something that trained staff assist with in other direct service centers—and AOC technology staff suggested that the site would benefit from a more carefully designed triage function. Users themselves may not know what questions to ask and complex or unique case circumstances may not be addressed by the site. Also, they may not be able to access the court's case management system to get information about the status of their case. In addition, some users simply needed reassurance that they were going to the right places and getting the right information for their situation.

AOC technology staff who conducted the user testing noted that people often failed to find the forms they needed, or had trouble doing so. Staff suggested including local forms on the site so that users can have a one-stop shop for all of the forms that they need. Specific information to help litigants prepare declaration and other attachments would also be useful. AOC staff also recommended incorporating more step-by-step instructions for the entire guardianship process. All of these recommendations are being addressed by the center's staff.

Vignette: Web Site Visitor Assisting a Friend With Domestic Violence Issues

An e-mail message from one Web site user to program staff said, "I ran across your site through a link when I was looking for help for a friend whose ex-husband was terrorizing her. I am so impressed." The user went on to explain that "nice girls" don't know about domestic violence restraining orders and that it was a huge relief to learn that it was possible to get help from the law before actual violence took place.

As discussed in more detail in Appendix B, a pop-up survey was developed to solicit users' feedback on the Web site. Less than 40 users responded to the survey between

February and October 2004. Due to the extremely low response, results are not presented in this report.

The Contra Costa County program's videoconferenced workshops had just begun when the customer satisfaction survey were distributed. Due to the newness of the workshops, attendance was low, so only nine surveys were collected. Results of these surveys are presented for descriptive purposes only, but they may provide some useful insight into customer perspectives on the early workshops.

All customers either strongly agreed or agreed with the general satisfaction questions. In Contra Costa County as in other sites, levels of satisfaction vary from one area to another. More than half of customers (five) strongly agreed that staff explained things clearly and treated them with respect and that they would recommend the workshop to friends, whereas almost no customers (one) strongly agreed that they were less confused about how the court works and knew more about how the laws work. One respondent also reported that being able to have open discussion with others in the workshop format was helpful.

All of the services were rated as either *very helpful* or *somewhat helpful*. Written instructions for forms, staff to answer questions, and staff help with forms seemed to be the most helpful services whereas information on where to get more help was rated as somewhat less helpful. Two of the nine customers received help somewhere other than the workshop.

Customers were also asked to rate the features of the videoconference equipment and facilities on a scale from one (*poor*) to five (*excellent*). Most customers gave the features average or better ratings. Although ratings for sound quality, technical assistance by on-site staff, and picture quality were fairly consistent at around four, room size and seating received average ratings closer to three. Picture quality was the only feature rated lower than three by any workshop participant (two participants rated picture quality as two).

Vignette: Videoconferenced Divorce Workshop Participant

A mother of two was ending her 20-year marriage and attended a workshop hosted by the Office of the Family Law Facilitator: “How to Start Your Dissolution (Divorce) Case.” She was notably comfortable with the fact that the workshop was being videoconferenced: that the attorney was in Martinez, and she was in Walnut Creek. She was able to ask a lot of questions, and the attorney was happy to answer them.

The mother had been verbally and emotionally abused during her marriage, and she came away from the workshop with a much clearer sense of how the divorce process works. She said she was deeply relieved to realize that she didn’t have to know how everything would work out to get things started; that she could fill out the forms in a way that would allow her and her spouse to negotiate some agreements; and that the process could be taken in bite-sized pieces. Interestingly, she said she was happy to know that her divorce could not be finalized without her knowing it.

She was very grateful to get the court’s help and to learn about other resources. She had felt that her world was falling apart and that she had to put it back together again all alone. As she left the court facility, she said, “I guess I can really do this.”

Workshop participants provided helpful suggestions for improving the workshops, including creating an index of forms and breaking up the workshop into smaller steps. Participants also mentioned a couple of minor difficulties with the videoconferencing format, noting that it would be helpful for the presenter to repeat questions asked by participants in Martinez and for the camera to point to the overhead projection as well as to the presenter. Notably, one respondent stated that she “appreciated not having to drive to [Martinez],” which suggests that videoconferencing has been effective in reducing geographic/transportation barriers.

Impact on Court Process

According to respondents, the Virtual Self-Help Law Center has not yet had a noticeable impact on the court, other than in the agreement rates of child custody mediation. As reported earlier, the agreement rate for mediations conducted at separate times was 37 percent and the agreement rate for mediations by videoconference was 59 percent. Prior to the availability of videoconferencing, agreement rates were even lower, at 24 percent. Family court services staff report a savings in mediator time as a result of the videoconference mediation, as the alternative—separate sessions at separate times—would have required two mediation appointments. Respondents asserted that the Virtual Self-Help Law Center will ultimately have an overall impact as litigants are better prepared and more knowledgeable about court processes.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

Accomplishment of Goals

The Virtual Self-Help Law Center has successfully implemented components of a model that uses technology to meet some needs of self-represented litigants. The pilot project has an informative and innovative Web site that delivers information about guardianship, unlawful detainer, and domestic violence, with plans to add divorce, family law orders to show cause, general court procedures, traffic, and small claims. Training CD-ROMs that show public librarians how to help the public access legal information online have been posted on the Web site and continue to be distributed in California and nationwide. In April 2004, the project began broadcasting weekly videoconferenced family law workshops to the Walnut Creek branch court, and it has plans to broaden the availability of videoconferenced workshops throughout the county. Videoconferenced mediations are occurring in Martinez for parents with domestic violence issues who want to meet simultaneously with a mediator but prefer to be in separate locations. Agreement rates for these mediations are much higher than for separate mediations. All of these components improve individuals' capacity to begin and complete cases, which increases their access to justice.

Providing services to the public took longer than respondents expected, primarily because of a delay in hiring appropriate staff and the large amount of time required to plan and coordinate the various components of this model, especially developing, reviewing, and updating Web site content. At the end of the evaluation, videoconferenced workshops were not occurring in as many locations as originally planned. The equipment is available, and center staff are working with the court to develop a volunteer program, which they hope will provide staff for the workshops in early 2005.

Surveys of Web site users and usage tracking software provide a wealth of information about visitors to the site, but more research is needed to understand how the Web site is being used, the characteristics of Web site users relative to those of nonusers, and the effectiveness of various mechanisms to present information (e.g., text, videos, audio). Further usability testing might determine how the site helps users and identify needs for additional content.

Service Issues

Project coordinator has critical skills necessary for this project. Respondents reported that the project coordinator's organization, communication, editing, and writing skills are highly valued and critical to the project's progress. During the first site visit, some respondents were concerned about her lack of legal background, but by the second visit, respondents said that this was often an asset rather than a problem, particularly in revising content to make it more accessible to nonattorneys.

The center strategically used consultants. Individuals interviewed asserted that using outside experts is an innovative strategy to ensure that the project develops appropriately

and professionally. The individuals involved in the center's development identified skills and knowledge the court possessed internally and sought outside assistance to fill in gaps. This has been worked well, according to those interviewed.

The center should continue to expand outreach and publicity efforts for the Web site. According to respondents, the site is still not well-known, either in the legal community or among the general public, in spite of the availability of posters and other print materials publicizing the site. This may be due to the fact that program staff decided to hold off on launching a full publicity campaign until the most frequently requested content (divorce and other family law) is made available. Another reason that awareness may be low is that until recently, court clerks did not have Internet access at work and therefore were unable to visit the site to see what it offered. With clerk access and continuing outreach and publicity efforts—including the distribution of ballpoint pens with the Virtual Self-Help Law Center's Web site address and the distribution of materials to key partner agencies—awareness of and referrals to the Web site are expected to increase.

Collaboration with the bar association's pro bono unit has been critical. The Contra Costa County Bar Association has been a major collaborator on this project. Bar association members have also been involved in reviewing content for the Web site, writing scripts for the videos, and giving workshops that have been taped and posted on the site. The bar's pro bono committee has agreed to have its weekly workshops videoconferenced to various locations. This partnership has been a crucial resource in expanding the number of people reached by existing services and allows the center to draw on expertise not available within the program.

The center provides opportunities to leverage resources and share information. Although self-represented litigants are the primary audience for the Virtual Self-Help Law Center, other courts, agencies, and practitioners such as attorneys and self-help center staff have benefited from the site's content as well. Several sites, including the main Contra Costa County court Web site, the California Courts Web site, and probono.net, provide links to the Virtual Self-Help Law Center's content. These efforts to share information and find opportunities to cross-link between sites help to ensure that content does not need to be duplicated and provide the additional benefit of allowing counties to focus on local rules and procedures. Program staff encourage other counties to copy content to their own Web sites or to develop content that can be added to the existing Web site. In addition, videoconferencing expands existing services with minimal additional staff time and no duplication of effort.