

ACTION PLAN TO ASSIST SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS

a. Description of Need:

Colusa County Superior Court is a leader in the community that is Colusa County. Well-respected and efficiently run, the court provides services to a relatively stable population every year. And yet, many of the people in this primarily rural area cannot afford to hire an attorney and so must seek justice by representing themselves. Language barriers present an obstacle to many non English speaking residents, and many self-represented litigants do not understand court procedures and cannot complete the necessary court forms to effectively use the courts and assert their legal rights. Thus, many do not receive full access to justice that all deserve.

By virtue of its rural nature, Colusa County has found itself with no legal service providers for self-represented and low-income persons, such as California Rural Legal Assistance and Legal Aid Society. The people of Colusa County who may qualify for such assistance must travel to Chico, Yuba City or Sacramento to seek that aid, and are often frustrated by being turned away because they are not residents of those other counties. A Small Claims Advisor is available via an eight hundred number.

The lawyers who make up the Colusa County Bar are conscientious and work hard to earn a living while ably representing their clients. The economic reality is that most members of the Bar are able to provide limited pro bono assistance and are aware of the unmet needs of self-represented litigants in Colusa County. In a recent letter, the Court asked members of the Bar to identify issues of concern related to self-represented litigants in Colusa County. In thoughtful responses to the Court’s letter, several members of the Bar reported that the types of cases most inquired about by people who could not afford to retain their services include family law, workers’ compensation, landlord/tenant, immigration, collection of debts, and consumer rights.

Many self-represented litigants need assistance in family law. Indeed the highest category of self-represented litigants served by the court is in family law as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<i>Percentage of Cases Filed Annually by Case Type Containing Pro Per Party</i>					
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Probate	13%	20%	19%	28%	8%
Family Law	78%	83%	85%	74%	78%
Unlimited Civil	20%	23%	22%	22%	20%
Limited Civil	2%	10%	9%	9%	6%

The Court currently has the services of a part time Family Law Facilitator who works diligently to serve the people who seek her assistance. However, the Court could use a full-time Family Law Facilitator to completely meet the needs in the county.

b. **Program Areas:** Based on the current circumstances in Colusa County, the Court has chosen to address the needs of self-represented litigants by including the following program areas in its Action Plan.

1. Augment Family Law Facilitator position
2. Enhance pro bono opportunities for the Bar
3. Provide public information about court procedures through a court web site

3. Program Action Plans:

3.a.1. Program Description: FAMILY LAW FACILITATOR POSITION

Convert the current part time Family Law Facilitator position to a full time position. Augment funding for a full time Family Law Facilitator.

3.b.1. **Program Partners:** The Judicial Council of California

3.c.1. Program Plan: FAMILY LAW FACILITATOR POSITION

<i>Task</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Person/Org Responsible</i>
Seek funding to augment position	2003	Judicial Council
Expand hours	2003	Judicial Council Court
Recruit and hire FLF if current FLF unable to expand to full time	2003	Court

3.a.2. Program Description: PRO BONO LEGAL SERVICES

Work with the local Bar to identify ways in which attorneys can provide legal services for limited portions of cases to assist self-represented litigants.

3.b.2. **Program Partners:** County Bar, State Bar of California, and The Judicial Council of California

3.c.2. Program Plan: PRO BONO LEGAL SERVICES

<i>Task</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Person/Org Responsible</i>
Work with local bar in unbundling of legal services	Ongoing	Court Local Bar

3.a.3. Program Description: ACCESS TO COURT INFORMATION

Enhance the information on the Court’s web site to provide additional information to assist self-represented litigants. Implement an IVR system that will enable customers (including those with disabilities and multi-lingual challenges) to have access to general court information, access to jury duty information, query the Case Management System for status of cases for Civil, Criminal, Small Claims, and Traffic, obtain information about bail, access to court calendar at any time, and conduct e-commerce with the court including automated approval for and receipt of credit card payments for fines, bail, and traffic school.

3.b.3. Program Partners: The Judicial Council of California

3.c.3. Program Plan: ACCESS TO COURT INFORMATION

<i>Task</i>	<i>Deadline</i>	<i>Person/Org Responsible</i>
Purchase equipment and software needed for installation of IVR	2003	Judicial Council Court
Develop information to be included in IVR system and web site	2003	Judicial Council Court

4. Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

- The Court has received a \$6,000 grant from the state to augment its website.
- The Court has applied for a \$25,000 grant from the State to install an IVR system to enhance access to court information.

5. Additional Resources Needed:

- Funding for full time Family Law Facilitator position.
- Enhance pro bono legal assistance.

6. Evaluation:

The court will develop an evaluation design that includes the use of regular court management reports.

7. State Support:

See “Additional Resources” above.

8. ***Unique Approaches:***

N/A

9. ***Sustaining the Action Plan:***

N/A

10. ***Other Comments:***

Although the court does not work with immigration and naturalization matters it has been brought to the court's attention that these types of cases are troublesome for local attorneys because of their lack of knowledge as to where to refer these questions and the limited financial resources of the individuals. The court would be willing to work with the proper agencies in order to provide this information to individuals and attorneys by way of pamphlets and applicable web sites.