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FACT SHEET

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JusticeCorps Program

“JusticeCorps has taught me much about myself, I was able to help people in a wide array of ways, on the floor, in the workshop, and in the courtroom. Our center sees over 300 self-represented litigants a day and we see the best and worst in people. But in this environment we also see the best and worst of ourselves. This center has shaped my character and that will really stick with me for a lifetime”

—Los Angeles JusticeCorps member

Over 4.3 million California court users each year are self-represented. Most come to California’s courthouses without attorneys because they cannot afford the high costs involved in hiring one. The California JusticeCorps program is a unique effort that utilizes the energy of AmeriCorps¹ members to help the judicial branch and its partners address one of the most pressing issues faced by courts around the country today—providing equal access to justice. The overall mission of the JusticeCorps program is to provide Californians with the help they need to navigate the court system by recruiting, training, and inspiring college students to serve as assistants in California’s court-based legal access self-help centers.

Overview

The JusticeCorps program began in 2004 as an innovative partnership of California’s Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), AmeriCorps, the Superior Court of Los Angeles County, various University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) campuses, and community-based legal aid services providers. Since 2004, the Superior Courts of Alameda and San Diego Counties, as well as the Counties of San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Placer, Yolo, and Sacramento, have joined the JusticeCorps program, giving the program an impact statewide.

¹ Launched under the 1993 National and Community Service Trust Act, AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs that engages Americans in intensive service to meet the nation’s critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment.

JusticeCorps members are recruited from UC and CSU undergraduate programs throughout the state. Members undergo intensive training in family law, small claims, and housing law before being placed in legal self-help centers to provide legal information to self-represented litigants. JusticeCorps members bolster the number of customers who receive one-on-one assistance at legal self-help centers that regularly have long lines extending out the door. In addition, many members are bilingual and are able to enhance services provided to non-English-speaking customers.

JusticeCorps members walk self-represented litigants through what can be a stressful time compounded by confusing legal forms and court proceedings. It is not uncommon for litigants to go to court only to realize they are in the wrong place, haven't brought the right forms, or have filled out a legal form incorrectly, and must start all over again. This can often lead to frustration and a decrease in trust in court proceedings. JusticeCorps members provide step-by-step directions and necessary legal information to empower litigants to progress toward resolution of their cases.

JusticeCorps is much more than an internship. It is a unique form of community service that gives college students an opportunity to assist someone who might otherwise feel that justice wasn't made accessible. JusticeCorps members are always under the supervision of an attorney and only offer legal information, not advice.

Each program partner adds a unique and vital component to JusticeCorps' success. AmeriCorps and its administering agency, CaliforniaVolunteers, provide program funding, program structure, and reporting requirements; the AOC is responsible for program management, including administering grant funds and reporting performance measurements back to CaliforniaVolunteers; the superior courts hire and oversee the JusticeCorps program staff and provide both the legal self-help centers where members serve and the attorneys who supervise the members; and partner universities help recruit members and support them throughout their service. Without each program partner's contribution, JusticeCorps would not be able to fulfill its mission.

Identifying the Need

While California works hard to provide adequate free legal aid programs, some 67 percent of California's poor still do not have access to even basic levels of legal advice, information, or assistance. For example, in California:

JusticeCorps Program

Page 3 of 3

- There are **8,361 self-represented litigants** for every **1 legal aid lawyer**.
- **Only one-third of the legal services needs of low-income Californians are met.**
- Courts report that **80 percent** of parties involved in family law disputes and **90 percent** of those in landlord/tenant cases represent themselves.

JusticeCorps Impact

Based on the success of the Los Angeles JusticeCorps, the program expanded to four Bay Area superior court systems in 2007 and to San Diego in 2008. Sacramento, Yolo, and Placer Counties will join the program in the fall of 2010. Currently, approximately 250 members are serving in the program statewide. Currently 700 alumni have successfully completed the program, and many are now pursuing law degrees or court-related careers.

Since the program began in 2004, JusticeCorps members have:

- Provided **238,500** hours of service to the public
- Provided **194,600 instances of assistance** to litigants in up to **24** different languages
- Filed **130,300** legal documents
- Made **122,500** referrals to associated services
- Officially closed **118** “open” divorce cases

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Additional resources:

General Program Information: www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/justicecorps/

Resources for Members and Program Applicants: www.calegaladvocates.org/justicecorps/

AmeriCorps and the Corporation for National and Community Service:

www.americorps.org/

www.nationalservice.org