

Los Angeles County Superior Court

JusticeCorps Focus Groups Report

February, 2007

I. Introduction

This study reports on a series of six focus groups, mostly of self-help center customers served in the Los Angeles County Superior Court. One group of court personnel was also conducted. Over the course of the focus groups, we collected a great deal of information about how people understood the courts and the role the self-help centers play in assisting them with their cases. We got feedback on what worked well, and a few things that could be improved.

The results are described in two parts. The first answers the research questions we posed prior to collecting the data. The second focuses on insights gained as a result of analyzing the data that are not direct responses to the research questions. For the most part, these take the form of suggestions self-help centers might use in designing or improving their services. In assessing these suggestions, it must be remembered that the purpose of this study was to gather data about the impact of the JusticeCorps program, as described in more detail below. The study was not designed to assess specific programs or services. Rather, the intent was to look at a range of programs, with the common denominator being the presence of JusticeCorps volunteers. This led us to look at services provided through workshops and individual assistance, and that helped people with marriage dissolutions, evictions, and other family law matters, in a manner that was not meant to be a cross program comparison. Nonetheless, qualitative data such as this is rich and can often reveal new insights not anticipated in the original design. Consequently, we present some suggestions about the delivery of self-help services that may be worth considering, and perhaps investigating further.

II. Purpose and Overview

The JusticeCorps Project is a collaborative project operated by the Superior Court of Los Angeles County in partnership with the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Los Angeles County Department of Consumer Affairs, four universities (California State University Northridge, California State University Dominguez Hills, California State Polytechnic University Pomona, and University of California Los Angeles), and three nonprofit legal aid agencies (Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Neighborhood Legal Services, Legal Aid Society of Orange County). Funded in part through an AmeriCorps grant, JusticeCorps recruits and trains 100 university students each year to work as assistants in Los Angeles County legal access self-help centers. The centers do intake screening and refer litigants to appropriate services within that center or elsewhere, and provide legal information and attorney-supervised legal assistance to self-represented litigants, either one-on-one, in person, through workshops, by

correspondence or by phone. While the centers provide legal information about how to fill out necessary documents and court procedures, they do not provide legal advice or undertake legal representation.

Each center is somewhat unique regarding the legal issues addressed and the mix of services provided. Probably the most common type of assistance is individual, in-person help provided on a walk-in basis. Typically, litigants are initially assessed as to the nature of their problem, given a packet of forms and instructions to look at, then seen by a non-lawyer legal assistant who helps them complete the needed forms correctly. Once the forms are completed, an attorney reviews the work for accuracy. The litigants are also usually given some instructions about what steps they need to take next, and possibly what they may have to do in court should an appearance be necessary. Particularly with multi-stage processes like marriage dissolution, customers are encouraged to return if they have any questions or run into problems. In some cases, litigants are assisted through the mail, or over the phone. In other cases, workshops of 10-12 people are held, run by an attorney with assistants serving as 'teacher's aids' for 3 or 4 customers at a time. Initial filings of marriage dissolutions appear to be the most common legal matter addressed, with eviction defenses making up the majority of the remainder. Other family matters such as name changes and guardianships, along with small claims cases, account for the rest. Special programs have also been set up in some cases, such as one that invites people who have long dormant divorce actions that are still pending to come in and finish them.

For this study, the Los Angeles Superior Court, JusticeCorps project (JusticeCorps) and the Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) worked together to conduct focus groups to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of services provided by JusticeCorps student volunteers assisting in the operation of these court based self-help centers, located throughout Superior Courthouses in Los Angeles County. The initial goal of the focus groups was to provide qualitative data on the effect of those services on center customers and their children as requested by the primary funder of JusticeCorps, the AmeriCorps program of the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps). Secondary goals of both JusticeCorps and CFCC are to better understand the impact of self-help center services, and to use that understanding to promote and improve the operation of the centers. In particular, the concrete impact of services (e.g., are forms properly filled out, do customers understand the steps they need to take to move their case forward) and the furtherance of principles of procedural justice (e.g., are litigants treated fairly, with impartiality and respect) were issues of interest, as reflected in the research questions set out below.

Research on self-help services conducted to date has indicated that the overwhelming majority of self-help center customers are satisfied with the assistance they receive. Many also indicate that they feel they understand their legal situation better, and have some confidence that they know what steps to take next in order to resolve their legal problem. These data, however, are largely limited to responses given in short, written exit surveys that do not reveal any qualifications, ambiguities, or details of the customers' opinions.¹ Data on the reasons for those opinions has rarely been collected.

¹ Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, *A Report to the California Legislature, Family Law Information Centers: An Evaluation of Three Pilot Programs* (2003); Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, *Model Self-Help Pilot Program, A Report to the*

While it is helpful to know whether customers are generally satisfied, and whether they generally feel they have been helped, more information is needed in order to refine and expand self-help services. Specifically, if most people respond favorably to general statements about the center, it does not reveal whether they also think the service could be improved, or whether there may be specific complaints that do not rise to the level of a general or overall opinion. They also do not reveal what the services mean to the customers, or give much information about how the services fit into their life or even their legal problems.

In order to uncover what customers understand about a service, what the service means to them, and how it fits into the larger context of their legal problem and lives, more in-depth information is needed than can be gathered using surveys or administrative statistics. Such information is only available through interactive conversations with those who receive the services (customers), and those who are involved with their delivery (self-help center staff such as JusticeCorps students) or otherwise experience their impact (court clerks and judicial officers).

This type of information, generally known as qualitative data, can only be gathered through individual interviews, group interview/discussions such as focus groups, and direct observations.² Pilot work conducted in the Fall of 2005 utilized each of these three methods. Based on this work, it was decided that focus groups would be the most efficient method of gathering the type of data described above. In addition to clarifying the methodology, the pilot work and subsequent discussions between staff members generated a series of research questions designed to shed light on the more general themes described in this section.

III. Methodology Summary

A more extensive description of the study methodology can be found in Appendix A. The following is a summary of that appendix.

A total of six focus groups were conducted by AOC's Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC) researchers in partnership with Los Angeles Superior Court JusticeCorps program staff and self-help center staff. Every effort was made to assure the groups were representative of the customer population, using lists of recently served customers as recruitment aids. Most of the customer participants were Latino (23 of 25). One group was held in Spanish, and most of the other groups had at least one person who preferred to speak in Spanish. The participants were low income, and 20 of the 25 had children at home. All groups were compared for themes that arose across groups. The findings presented are those on which consensus was reached either within or across groups. If contrasting views emerged, those differences are noted.

Legislature (2005); Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, *Equal Access Fund, A Report to the California Legislature* (2005).

² For a more in-depth discussion of the need for qualitative methodologies to uncover meanings and understandings, see e.g., Piaget, J. (1998/1929). *The Child's Conception of the World* (pp. 1–32). London, UK: Routledge and Myles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

The initial phases involved in designing the implementation of the focus groups involved close collaboration with JusticeCorps staff at Los Angeles Superior to determine the feasibility of the proposed participant recruitment plan, and the schedule and locations where the focus groups would be conducted. This initial phase included: 1) Site visits to court based self-help centers; 2) developing research questions; and 3) conducting two initial focus groups of legal aid clients and self-help center customers.

Focus group facilitators included two research analysts from the AOC's Center for Families, Children & the Courts. The facilitators followed a written script created to give researchers an outline of how the conversation was predicted to flow. Researchers also used "probes" to adjust the script questions for the purpose of generating more discussion as necessary or yielding information more directly pertinent to the research questions. Approximately 20-30 participants were recruited for each focus group which ultimately yielded an actual participant size of three to 8 individuals per group. Focus group sessions were approximately 1 1/2 hours long. As incentives and remuneration, participants were provided with dinner and retail store gift cards. Researchers followed protection of human subjects protocol by informing participants of their rights, asking for and receiving verbal consent and keeping reported comments anonymous

The focus groups were tape recorded and then transcribed. Spanish language sections of the recordings were translated into English. The transcripts were coded and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. Results are reported via textual summaries of focus group dialogue and verbatim quotes from the speakers.

IV. Research Questions and Emergent Themes

In order to provide more detail than previous surveys about the effectiveness and impact of self-help center services on the lives of customers, their children, and their families, and the role of JusticeCorps students in providing those services, nine questions were formulated:

1. Why are litigants representing themselves in court?
2. What types of services are or would be most helpful?
3. Do the services help customers better understand the court system?
4. Do the services help customers better understand their specific legal matter?
5. How have the services impacted the customers' decisions and actions?
6. What would the customers have done in the absence of the services?
7. Did the perception of the customer change as a result of the services received from the self-help center?
8. What is the impact of JusticeCorps services on customers' lives, especially with regard to their children?
9. Do customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully?

These questions were developed through consultations between staff at CFCC, grant administrators at the Administrative Office of the Courts, and staff at the Los Angeles County Superior Court responsible for the self-help centers. They served as the basis for the focus group questions described in Appendix B, and direct answers to them are provided in the Results section of this report entitled Answers to Research Questions. In addition, other important

themes emerged from the focus groups regarding what people were thinking and feeling coming into the centers, how they experienced center and court staff, and their assessments about the centers and the courts afterwards. This data is presented in the results section of this report entitled Additional Results.

V. Results

Types Of Services Represented

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

Description Of Study Population

The study population included six focus groups total. A breakdown of the locations of the centers and services discussed by the participants involved follows:

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

The focus group participants included a total of 25 customers and 8 court staff. Demographic and family characteristics of the participants follows:

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

Answers To Research Questions

1. **Why are litigants representing themselves in court?** *Most litigants are representing themselves in court because they can't afford an attorney or it would be a severe hardship to pay for an attorney.*

“[A]s far as legal-wise I couldn't afford the fee either, you know, for an attorney or again to fill out the papers correctly. I've tried to do it, that's how I ended up referred up here. It took me almost two years doing my own papers back and forth which I could have prevented had I known they were up here.” – *Center customer*. “I didn't know my rights. I'm an immigrant.... All I had was just the people that I knew [family] and I couldn't go to a professional because I couldn't afford it.” – *Center customer*. Litigants also reported having had bad experiences with attorneys and paralegals such as having difficulty contacting them, enduring long delays, or getting poor quality work.

These views were echoed by court staff. “I can't tell you how many times when I have a litigant who could barely afford the bus ride down here has spent—I can't tell you how much—to have some paralegal service prepare documents for them which are just, they're unprocessable.” – *Court staff*

2. **What types of services are or would be most helpful?** *Unrepresented litigants want prompt and individualized answers to their questions.*

People expressed a desire to have some knowledgeable person available of whom they could ask questions and get clear answers: “[I]t's just a really good place to go. Just to know that you can go somewhere ... to just [get] support and ... they don't treat you like you're stupid, or ... like you're dumb, or like you don't have everything.” – *Center customer*. “You are made to feel so comfortable [at the workshop], you know, like “Don't worry, it's going to get fixed,” and the way they would—the JusticeCorps members—how they were going around and right behind you, you would do something wrong, right away on the spot they would tell you.” – *Workshop customer*

Court staff confirmed this customer feedback: “I would see people come back ... looking for me, to be very upset that they got turned away... [Y]ou see less of that the more resources we can send in any of those directions where we're going to be providing any type of self-help.” – *Court staff*

Most people were willing to proceed on their own, but they wanted enough information so that they could get their forms completed properly and make good decisions on the basis of knowing their legal options. Litigants wanted ‘how-to’ assistance regarding court procedures, information and perhaps training on what to expect and how to conduct oneself in court. Some unrepresented litigants wanted brief legal advice regarding options and tactics, although this was outside the scope of services provided by the centers.

3. **Do the services help customers better understand the court system?** *Self-help center services help customers better understand the procedure that will be followed in their case.*

More emphasis might be given, however, regarding what will happen in court. The workshops seem particularly helpful in ensuring that people understand how the court process works: “[Y]ou knew exactly why you were waiting so many months between the workshops, ... because of the reason of you’re served and you’re entering a default or so on.” – *Workshop customer*

4. Do the services help customers better understand their specific legal matters? *Self-help center services help customers better understand their specific legal matter to a limited extent.*

“[Without the self-help center] I wouldn’t know my rights, I mean I would know more or less, but I couldn’t defend myself in the court properly. Or write down the papers properly, because my education is not that great. So to me I wouldn’t have that much of a chance as I did coming here....” – *Center customer*

Some customers, however, also want legal advice that the centers can not give. This appeared to be more of an issue for customers facing eviction than it did for those going through a divorce, or handling other family law matters: “When I did my divorce I was comfortable with that situation, when I left here. I was confident everything was going to be okay. In the court everything was done right. With my eviction, I was not comfortable. No knowing much of anything. ... It’s two different things, two situations. That one I already knew the outcome because that was an easy divorce. No property involved, no nothing. It was an easy, simple divorce. As far as the eviction it’s a different situation, because ... they’re not letting me know my options – whether I can fight to try to stay there, or how long do I have before I go. Everything is up in the air. I filled out the forms. They did help me very good on the forms, but as far as situation or any kind of advice – I need advice and they can’t ... give us advice.” – *Center customer*

5. How have the services impacted the customers' decisions and actions? *The services provided by the self-help centers seem to have played a crucial role in allowing people to move forward with their cases.*

Before the services, these customers reported being stuck, frustrated, and unsure of how to proceed. They overwhelmingly felt that a major benefit of the centers was that they could make substantial progress toward resolving their legal problem and moving on with their lives. Statements like, “That chapter of my life is now closed and I can move forward” captured that feeling in a nutshell. After visiting the self-help centers, most also reported having a good understanding of what needed to be done, and what steps to take to resolve their legal problem: “[I]f I had of known three years ago what I learned in a matter of, what, three months? My god, the wealth of information.” – *Center customer*

Participants also talked of feeling like they had control of their situation. For example, people were told that, despite the work being put into completing dissolution forms, they did not have to file them right away if they were not ready. In fact, people were told “you file whenever you’re ready to file,” and they felt that “so just by her saying that we had control ... I felt that I had control because of what she said.” – *Workshop customer*

6. **What would the customers have done in the absence of the services?** *Without the service, most people said they really did not know what they would have done, but that they probably would have continued to delay dealing with the matter.*

Others said they would probably have tried to find a way to hire an attorney or paralegal to help them. “I think I probably would have just like set it aside, and just keep on waiting until I had enough money to hire a lawyer.” – *Center customer*

7. **Did the perception of the customer change as a result of the services received from the self-help center?** *Customers felt more positively toward the court system as a result of the service, and that the courts were making a real effort to help them.*

That view was even echoed by those who did not get all the help they were looking for. This contrasts with attitudes people said they had about the courts prior to coming to the centers, essentially that courts were unresponsive to their needs, unhelpful, and even hostile to their presence. “I didn’t think it was this friendly, honestly. Because when you’re dealing with court and judge you think it’s like the worst....” – *Center customer*. Other participants stated that they felt going into court without an attorney put one at a disadvantage: “[W]hen you go to court, I’ll be honest with you, my experience is you can’t expect anything ... if you don’t go in there with a legal attorney ... you’re already behind the eight ball. You’re not even going to get listened to, okay?” – *Center customer*. Another customer, however, explained the change that many seemed to have experienced as a result of going to the center:

It gave me a more positive outlook because I’ve been to court for other things. Like ... child support ... so I kind of had a bad view of the system at that time. But then when I went through this experience, it made me have a different outlook on the system, and I really feel like now the courts are really trying to help people. ...they’re becoming a little bit more informative, ... giving us other avenues to take. So I think that’s really good. – *Workshop customer*.

8. **What is the impact of JusticeCorps services on customers’ lives, especially with regard to their children?** *The JusticeCorps program provides badly needed assistance to the Los Angeles County self-help centers that allows them to provide high-quality help to many more customers, allowing them to move on with their lives.*

The program assists them in the timely creation of enforceable, written orders – and the elimination of a major preoccupation in their parents’ lives, which can have a direct impact on their children, as one mother explained: “[W]hen things started going bad, and the fact that I was still married to him, my son ... was very angry and he would lash out at me and argue with me at first. And it’s like now.... he’s handling things a lot better because he knows mom is doing something to get rid of this horrible person.” – *Center customer*

One judicial officer explained another problem: “Some do [*just go away if their paperwork is rejected*], and they get remarried, several times – and find out that they were never not married. Their children have not had paternity cases. The children have no judgments of paternity.” – *Judicial Officer*

9. Do customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully? *Customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully by self-help center staff.*

“They treat us with respect. Not like downgrade us by our – what we’re capable of doing or not doing, or our situation, you know, or like ‘Well, you’re not paying anyways’ kind of attitude. – *Center customer*

On the whole, these unrepresented litigants also felt the judicial officers treated them fairly. The feeling of being treated with respect declined somewhat with regard to judicial officers, even more with regard to court staff, and seemed lowest regarding legal aid organizations, social service agencies, and the private bar. It should be noted that there were indications people distinguished between a lack of respect based on overburdened workers and simple indifference, hostility, or prejudice – but these topics would need to be explored more specifically in other studies in order to fully explicate the distinctions.

Programmatic Insights

In addition to answering our specific research questions, this data also provided some useful suggestions for the delivery of self-help services. In particular, there emerged from the data some important information about the circumstances of people coming into the centers, qualities that seem to make center services truly helpful, and benefits that accrue to courts and JusticeCorps students from the centers and the JusticeCorps program.

Customer Profile

Something of a profile of self-help center customers emerged from these transcripts that is not told by looking at demographic data such as age, gender, or ethnicity, nor is it revealed through post-service satisfaction surveys. As described below, litigants are coming into self-help centers anxious, confused, frustrated, desperate, scared, and sometimes angry. Most have already endured long delays for reasons they only partially, if at all, understand. They suspect that indifference or malice on the part of others, or perhaps their own failings in not being educated enough, or speaking enough English, are to blame. What they do know is that most of their attempts to find assistance have been stymied by lack of money and/or poor quality service from a variety of supposed providers. And courts, for their part, seem largely indifferent to their struggles.

Customers are confused, anxious, and often frustrated

These customers often talked about the confusion, anxiety, frustration, and to some extent desperation that they felt coming into the courthouse, and/or before encountering the self-help center staff. As one woman put it, “[Y]ou are literally frustrated. It’s like you’re at the end of your rope and all you want to do is just – ‘Look, I done been on the phone, I done been over here, can ya’ll just help me please?’ You kind of just get to the point where you say okay, if this don’t work I’ll just give up.”

Another woman, involved in a custody dispute over her daughter, described her situation and why she appreciated the self-help center:

It just was really a stressful, scary moment. But you know having them here and helping me out with the paperwork, it really helped me because I felt like ... what do I do? where do I go? You know, I don't have the money, you know I wasn't on welfare, I was making it on my savings. ...[A]ll the money that I saved since I was working, since I was 15, went to, you know, helping out taking care of my daughter and my parents who were sick. It was just a really difficult moment at that time. But just having them here really helped me out....

These views were also echoed by court staff: “[M]ost of the times when they come in they’re scared anyway. They’re scared they’re frightened, they’re confused, they have no clue what’s going on in here and the forms are confusing for me, ... I can’t fill one out, and I work here.” Of course, lack of assistance from court staff was recognized by those staff as contributing to the litigants’ anger and frustration:

[O]ne of the things that would anger a lot of them, that you could hear all the time, is the confusion of their inability to fill the form out and they could not get help. And they would say “Well, why are you here if you can’t help me?” And especially a person walking down the hallway like me. “Well can’t you help me fill this form out? You work here. How could you not fill this form out?”

Customers have experienced incomprehensible delays

People spoke of having their cases drag on for many months, or even years, with little or no progress. Filings were frequently rejected for reasons that were not understood by the litigants, which made it hard for them to correct the problem. The delays caused by improperly completed forms were also noted by court staff: [Prior to the self-help center] you continue it over, you get some help but, then you come back, it’ll be a little bit better but it will still be not anywhere close a lot of times. So it’d have to be continued then a second time, so I would be seeing some people two, three times just to get a default.

Customers have been unable to find affordable help

Litigants talked of searching for help for days, weeks, months, and sometimes years before learning about the center. Often the information came through referrals from some other entity, or by word of mouth between friends and family. Others found the service directly through the clerk’s office, or on the court’s website. A number of litigants said the service should be advertised more, such as flyers at community aid organizations or ads on television and radio. The consensus was that the need in the community far exceeded the number of people who knew about or used the service.

It is important to note that while the customers we talked with said they came to the self-help center because they could not afford an attorney, most of them also explained that they had tried and failed to find help elsewhere. Most of the customers we interviewed said that they were representing themselves because they could not afford an attorney or paralegal to assist them, or that it would be very difficult to find the money to pay for such help. They expressed relief at not having to come up with the money, or possibly endure a lengthy delay (beyond what they already had) in order to find the money. Others had gone to the center because they had tried to get assistance, usually through private paralegals, but the assistance had somehow been

inadequate – forms either not being completed, or improperly completed. One group ended up being entirely composed of people who had been referred to the self-help center because the paralegals they had hired to complete their divorces had not filled out their initial paperwork properly, or correctly advised them on the supporting documentation they would need to show the court.

Many of the customers who were going through a divorce also said they had put off dealing with the matter, partially for personal reasons, and partially because of lack of money and not knowing how to proceed. Others credited the self-help services with enabling them to get into court at all. For example, one woman going through an eviction had struggled with whether to

fight the situation [*an eviction based on failure to pay a potentially illegal rent increase*], period. I mean usually to fight it and to do it the right way, you need some kind of attorney, which I can't afford, right? So I mean who's going to help me do the paperwork or tell me what my rights are? ...[W]hatever they say [*the landlord*] ... I couldn't tell if they were telling me the truth of what's going on or not.... I would just go by what they're saying because they're hiring an attorney. So when I came here they're the ones that were able to help me, or I couldn't do it.

Another litigant turned to self-representation because the affordable help she had located (in this case a private paralegal) had left some things undone (a name change as part of an otherwise successfully completed divorce): “[S]he did most of the work that we agreed that she would be doing but it was just little things like the name change we had to get that done.” When it became evident that the name change needed to be finished, she looked for the paralegal, but “unfortunately I couldn't find her ... her phone numbers were gone and I remember when we went to court for the mediation and for the custody hearings I saw the self help signs and so I remembered ... the Center to try to get help and they helped me fill out the rest of the paperwork.”

Even systems set up to find affordable assistance did not seem to fare well with some customers:

[The court] kept referring me to attorneys, but I couldn't afford the attorneys. ... To, you know, lesser fee attorneys. Even one that they did give me they never answered. And then one was out of service, and I was like, okay—so. But finally, I guess because I kept trying and trying, they finally—somebody mentioned up here. But like I said, had I known sooner I would have prevented those two years, right?

Summary

Overall, it was clear that these unrepresented litigants were desperate for information about what to do and how things worked. In short, they were looking for answers, and often not finding them. Even some of those who were able to locate written self-help materials were at a loss about what to do with them: “In my case I printed out a set of dissolution papers or forms from [*a website*]. Honestly, I wouldn't have been able to do it [*on my own*]. There's so many questions

that were explained there at the [center] that would not have been explained obviously on the papers that I downloaded, I would never have been able to guess the correct answer.”

Self-Help Center Service Insights

These customers wanted to feel confident they were talking with someone who understood their situation and was dedicated to helping them find answers to their questions. They wanted to be able to “take the next step” in their cases, which meant completing the necessary paperwork and understanding the court processes they were facing. If they were going to court, they wanted information about what to expect and what they should do there. It was also important for these customers that they be treated fairly and respectfully by the staff of the self-help centers. Among other things, they wanted to understand how services were allocated (who got seen first), and see who was actually reviewing their paperwork. While individualized attention was clearly important to them, they also expressed a willingness to make use of printed materials and some even suggested computerized forms would be desirable. These service qualities are set out in more detail, below.

Service that reduces stress

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

The transition from struggling on her own to encountering the center’s help was well described by one mother:

And then we come down to the court and every question that’s going through your mind like oh my God what’d I do, how do I do? At that point you’re panic stricken, like I just want this done.... And you come down, ... and you’re looking at all these people and you’re kind of like terrified.... But you get in there and everybody’s like friendly and they’re all calm: “Aww, don’t worry about nothing. Have a seat we’ll get to you in just a minute.” And so that’s kind of what my experience was.

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

These sentiments were also echoed by court staff who, even if they did not deal directly with center customers, nonetheless noticed a change in the hallway atmosphere following the implementation of the JusticeCorps program:³

[T]he first thing I notice right away, especially on Friday, was how calm it was. Before JusticeCorps, I used to feel sorry for all the people that worked in the [the center] especially on Friday afternoons, [the customers have] been sitting here all

³ The institution of the JusticeCorps program has provided significant assistance to the Los Angeles County court-based self-help centers by adding the equivalent of well over 12 full-time positions. This assistance allows the centers to provide more individualized assistance to customers who clearly value such help.

afternoon. They're waiting to be seen and they can't be seen, so they're hostile. So the supervisor is out there trying to take their names to make sure they can be at the top of the list of the next working day. That has dissipated. It just went away. The hostility on the floor just kind of just (exhale), and I was actually amazed. I told [the supervisor], I said you know whether they know it or not they've made a difference.

Service that gives prompt answers to questions

Litigants repeatedly said they wanted answers to questions when they called or asked them, rather than referrals and appointments. The self-help centers were viewed as providing that service: "...after running around, like I said, making phone calls and stuff, you get in there and it's like a breath of fresh air because everything that you need is right there." This high degree of satisfaction was expressed about the workshops, and about the individualized services: "[W]ith them it was done right away. ...really quick and fast."

One effect of the JusticeCorps program on the operation of the self-help centers that is probably not apparent to the customers is that more people are seen in a timely manner. That this is important to customers can be assumed from the descriptions of frustration at delays noted above. The benefit, however, was well described by one court staff member:

I would see people come back ... looking for me, to be very upset that they got turned away, "They can't help me today. They're full. I have to come back. I already took today off work." ... [S]o you see less of that the more resources we can send in any of those directions where we're going to be providing any type of self-help.

Overall, from the court's perspective, the self-help centers have removed a major source of dissatisfaction for the litigants, as illustrated by this exchange between court personnel:

- F: Is this something what you're hearing resonates throughout the courthouse or have there been any difficulties?
- CP1: I've never heard any negatives.
- CP2: I think that's it, it's not that we've heard complaints it's that we haven't heard complaints. That's where it's going to.
- CP3: This comes from the man that fields all the complaints.
- CP2: The number of complaints about things has drastically dropped off.
- CP3: Because one of the biggest complaints is—
- CP2: Can't get help.
- CP3: I can't get help. I can't figure it out, I thought I had it under control and you tell me to go away because I don't have it under control and now what am I supposed to do?
- CP2: and you hear that walking up and down the hallways. You don't hear that that often anymore.

Service that is pro-active

Most customers seemed to appreciate the pro-active nature of the services provided by the self-help centers:

[W]hen you walk in just for the group it's all kind of people. You don't know exactly who to go to and they go, "Oh can I help you? Are you here for the workshop?" You know, you don't have to ask anything. Before you can get the question out they're like, "You need help?" Someone's immediately right there. They were just right on it all the time.

In a couple of cases, however, customers who were looking more for legal advice said they wished the staff had questioned them a little more actively about what they really wanted, rather than just getting into filling out the forms. This underscores the desire of customers to be actively engaged and questioned about why they are there and what they need, in particular as opposed to the alternative of waiting in a long line to ask a question, only to find out they are in the wrong place.

Especially useful seems to be the practice of using JusticeCorps students to talk with people who are standing in line, assess their needs, inform them about what to expect, and in many cases, get them working on filling out needed forms while they're waiting.

Service committed to finding an answer

We repeatedly heard comments that a hallmark of the service in general was a commitment to finding an answer: "They were going to find a way to help us one way or the other." or "Taking the time to care and answer a question." The difference between experience at the centers and many similar experiences litigants had trying to get help was, simply put, the difference between "I don't know, I can't help you" and "I don't know, let me find out."

The freshness, high-quality training, and inquisitiveness of the JusticeCorps students was mentioned repeatedly as being particularly helpful in this regard. It was explained that they tended to naturally want to find out how things worked, and how to help people. In providing these kinds of self-help services, it seems important to keep these characteristics in mind, whether for staff or volunteers. Particularly because self-help services do not see customers through to the end of their cases, it seems important that staff and volunteers actively seek out as many answers as possible for the litigants.

Respectful treatment by service providers

In addition to getting practical help, these customers appreciated and valued the manner in which they were treated. It seems likely that being treated fairly and respectfully, in addition to getting answers to their questions, contributed to the reduction in stress they experienced. For example, people made comments like the following when asked how they were treated at the centers:

C1: Professional.... You didn't feel like you didn't have any money.

C2: Yeah. Everybody was treated the same, just like you said.

People in the workshops seemed especially appreciative that they didn't have to state publicly whether they were employed, on disability, etc. In addition, the English speaking participants noted with approval that the Spanish speaking sub-group was attended to as well, with care being taken to make sure their questions were being answered.

Litigants getting individual assistance were no less appreciative of the type of treatment they got:

[I]t's just a really good place to go. Just to know that you can go somewhere ... to just [get] support and ... they don't treat you like you're stupid, or ... like you're dumb, or ... like you don't have everything. I mean, I grew up here, I grew up poor so you know it's just good to just have a place where you can just actually get some help. ... [T]here are a lot of good people in the world ... and this is one of the places that makes you feel like everything's all right. I just walked out of here happy....

They readily explained, as in this exchange, what they liked about how they were treated:

- C1: They treat us with respect. Not like downgrade us by our – what we're capable of doing or not doing, or our situation, you know, or like “well, you're not paying anyways” kind of attitude.
- C2: Yeah, no judgment or anything.
- C3: They really want to help you. And it's really nice. ...Because some places like ... I'm not going back over there. ... It's like god, you already know that you can't afford it, you don't need anybody to remind you that you can't afford it. And it's just a good place to come to. ... and like she said, not feel treated like you're beneath them or something.

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

Particularly in the workshop session, litigants expressed a high degree of trust and confidence in the staff (including the JusticeCorps students) that went a long way in easing their fears and anxiety:

[Y]ou get in there and they're like “oh yeah, we do that here.” I mean everybody just knew what they were talking about. If you asked a certain question ... they'll go over and talk to whoever they need to talk to, and they will come back and say oh okay well this is what you need to do. You didn't have to just keep sitting on hold for hours or waiting for somebody to come back to the phone you know or calling all these different numbers. Soon as you walked in there whatever question you had after they got everybody seated and gave you your packet they answered the question. Even if it was before the class even started. So it was like you were like, ah, (sigh).

Others found them equally reassuring: “They were knowledgeable, they were friendly, they made you feel comfortable.” and “[J]ust listening to them just conversing amongst each other you knew, okay, these people know what they're doing. ... Or if they didn't know, they knew where to go get the answer.”

Spanish speaking users of individualized self-help services also thought the JusticeCorps students were particularly helpful: “They were very kind, very attentive. ...the aid of the youths was very, very efficient because they attend to you, you feel that they are paying attention to you, they take care of you, they help you....

Service that eases customers financial worries

Customers were clearly relieved that the service was free and that they would not have to come up with substantial amounts of money to pay an attorney. In addition, and another example of respectful treatment, customers noted that they were not made to feel inferior because they were receiving a free service:

Financial frustration was eliminated. That’s the key. Most of the people that were in the workshop—we were all like talking to each other ... and when I noticed that everybody that was in that room we were all having the same type of issue. It was the money. And not one time did any of the people that were helping us ever make that an issue. It was never made an issue. They were going to find a way to help us one way or the other. Even if you did have to spend a little bit of money it would have been well worth it. Opposed to thousands and thousands of dollars trying to pay a private attorney.

Litigants also mentioned that, while they did not expect help with fee waivers, they were glad when they received it. For those for whom it was available, the ability of the clerks to grant fee waivers was also seen as a real benefit:

...and the man took it [*the fee waiver petition*], he goes “I’ll be right back,” and he comes back with all these stamps and he sets them down and he starts stamping this paper with this and then, I’m like “Aww, now I gotta come back at 1:30.” And ... he goes, “Oh we’re going grant it—stamp!” And then he made copies and handed me mine back and that was that. He’s like, “Oh you’re approved” and I’m like, “I get approved?” And he goes “yes” and I’m like “ahhh!!” I grab my papers and I go running out the door to my car. I mean I was like ecstatic ... I was in tears.

Attention to detail, experienced staff, practical advice, and protection of privacy are important to customers

Not everyone was completely pleased with the quality of help they received, however. In the workshops, for example, there were apparently some problems with getting copied papers back in the proper order, and in one case a customer reported having another participant’s copies mixed up with his. Although the problem was sorted out before it got very far, such problems point to the need for careful review of document packets before they are presented to the court clerk for filing. Similarly, in some cases of individual assistance, customers reported being initially helped by staff (it was not clear whether JusticeCorps or not) who seemed to be inexperienced (there were many things they appeared unfamiliar with), or simply told them what boxes to fill in and where to sign without offering much explanation.

Other people explained that they would have liked a little more help in understanding the court system:

It doesn't have to be elaborate, it doesn't have to be expansive, it doesn't have to be too time consuming, just okay, we're going to sit down after we fill out your paperwork and we're going to have a little court awareness session with you. And you know just those words right there will probably make everyone in this room feel comfortable already. Just okay, what does that mean? Okay we're going to tell you just inform you a little bit about what the procedure is going to be when you go to court so you don't feel so intimidated. So it could alleviate some that stress that you already walked into these doors with.

We were also reminded by a couple litigants that: [M]ost of the things that we're going to court for, it's pretty personal you don't want to go and discuss it with everybody." Another added that having to retell one's situation several times, to different people was "intimidating."

I would have liked it more if they didn't ask so many personal questions. Because I went from the girl at the front desk asking you what was going on and, yeah to a certain extent you have to give a little bit but she just kept edging on the questions. I'm like, I don't see how that has anything to do with the paperwork I need. ... and then you sit down with the people that are in there helping you and then you got to do it again.

Staff and volunteers both should be aware that customers are in a vulnerable, and for some embarrassing, situation and that the dignity afforded by being able to keep one's troubles as private as possible can be very important to some people. Others, as we heard from some workshop participants, are happy to share their thoughts, feelings and insights with those in similar situations. In other words, the opportunity to network can be important for some. This, of course, refers back to the importance of individual treatment—seeing each person as uniquely as possible and giving them services in accordance with their individual needs and circumstances.

Customers want to see who is helping them

In various ways, and repeatedly throughout the focus groups, many people voiced a desire that the process they were involved in be transparent. In other words, that they could see who was helping them, understand clearly what help they were and were not being given, and be able to communicate directly with those giving them assistance. In addition, some expressed a desire that there be clearly understood and fair rules about who got helped and in what order.

This was not a universal desire, for some people simply wanted their legal issue to go away, and were not concerned about how that got done, so long as someone attended to the problem properly. For most people, however, a more transparent process seemed preferable. This could come through a good understanding of the legal process ahead of them (which most, but not all, people seemed to have achieved); evidence that a knowledgeable person was both helping them, and ultimately reviewing their paperwork (again, most but not all people felt they had this – for those who didn't, the problem seemed to be that they never got to see the attorney reviewing their paperwork or answering volunteer's questions, those people would just disappear into an office periodically); legal advice about options and what would probably happen in court (some

wanted this, but none got it); honest, equitable treatment by staff (most people reported this also, but at least one group – the Spanish language group – reported that they were told the reason English speaking people were served more quickly than Spanish speakers was that the English speakers had made an appointment, whereas they knew the truth was that there were fewer Spanish speaking staff in proportion to the need).

Dissolution workshops

While we were only able to do one focus group of workshop participants, and that group was very small (3 people), the feedback they gave us was quite valuable and overwhelmingly positive. The marriage dissolution process is fairly complicated, involving several steps, having to serve notice, and make potentially difficult decisions about very personal and sometimes complicated subjects like division of property and custody of children. Each customer clearly has some unique aspects to their case. Nonetheless, the customers we talked to were quite pleased with the workshop model of helping them complete their divorces, and their statements helped us understand why the workshops they attended worked for them.

In brief, it appears that the workshop model in dissolutions was an efficient way to assist 10-12 litigants at a time. The workshops themselves were run by an attorney, who was assisted by one JusticeCorps volunteer for about every three participants. This allowed the attorney to go over each needed form in front of the whole group, then have individual work filling the forms out assisted by JusticeCorps students.

Litigants in the workshops felt they had a good understanding of what was happening in court because they were given information at a pace they could understand: “[they go] detail by detail, step by step, at our pace not their pace, you know? ...it kind of reminded me when you were just starting school, and they were going step by step and no rushing, no nothing.”

In the workshop group, in answer to a question about whether the customers understood what was going on, the consensus answer was “absolutely.” For example, people came away feeling they understood the process well: “[Y]ou knew exactly why you were waiting so many months between the workshops, ... because of the reason of you’re served and you’re entering a default or so on.”

Workshop customers also explained that instructions, by way of possible scenarios, were given in the workshop about appearing in court. While the examples mostly pertained to those with custody disputes and were not directly applicable to these participants, when asked about how they would feel if they had to go to court they responded “confident,” “comfortable,” and “no fear whatsoever.” They felt that if they did have to make a court appearance, things would be okay because of the reassurance and information they had been given in the workshop.

In particular, the JusticeCorps volunteers were integral to providing this level of service. As one divorce workshop participant put it: “maybe every two or three people there would be one [JusticeCorps] person here and one person there and just around the table, and they were just keeping their eye out. You would see a few of them helping – like some of us were a little slower writing than others and they’d come and say, ‘Oh, you need to put this here, or you need to put this here, or oh no, take that out.’ So they were right there all the time just kind of keeping their

eyes peeled on what we were doing.... And if they didn't know, they would go ask [the attorney] and they would come back and [say] 'okay, this is what you need to do.'"

Different types of cases may call for different types of assistance

Perhaps the feelings are best summed up by one customer who had used the centers for both divorce and eviction cases. The usefulness of procedural assistance in getting the paperwork filled out properly is clear, but so is the desire for legal advice in circumstances in which rights are not understood, and likely outcomes are nearly impossible for unrepresented litigants to predict:

When I did my divorce I was comfortable with that situation, when I left here. I was confident everything was going to be okay. In the court everything was done right. With my eviction, I was not comfortable. No knowing much of anything. ... It's two different things. Two situations. That one I already knew the outcome because that was an easy divorce. No property involved, no nothing, it was an easy, simple divorce. As far as the eviction it's a different situation, because ... they're not letting me know my options, whether I can fight to try to stay there or how long do I have before I go. Everything is up in the air. ... it was very helpful what little that they did, but I would have appreciated having a whole lot more.

Court Operations Insights

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

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

[M]ost of my work is through this hallway here, and one of the first thing I notice right away, especially on Friday, was how calm it was. Before JusticeCorps, I used to feel sorry for all the people that worked in the FLIC, the Family Information Office, especially on Friday afternoons, they've been sitting here all afternoon. They're waiting to be seen and they can't be seen so they're hostile. So the supervisor is out there trying to take their names to make sure they can be at the top of the list of the next working day. That has dissipated. It just went away.

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

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

J1: After we reduce the level of tension, and after we improve our procedures with the feedback one, the product, the end product is also better, and it's such a relief to have somebody come into court representing themselves who actually covers the issues that they're supposed to cover, has the paperwork done correctly. ... when you see somebody who had been

through the self help center, it makes a very different hearing, it makes a very different default process. It's all different because the work is better.

J2: [T]he joy that I've had ... is not only that it made it easier for me with people coming in, but the product that the public went out with was so much better than it would have been had we haphazardly done what we needed to do to get them through. They actually were getting a quality judgment that they could rely on and they were walking out of here the way people who could afford representation could walk out of here with. And what a joy that is to be able to give them something they could rely on.

Equally important, it was evident to these court staff that the litigants understood what they were doing: "Just listening to the people talk they tell you they are getting help. And they understand the help that they're getting. They're not confused. And I just thought that was amazing."

One judicial officer explained the difficulty of being faced with an unrepresented litigant who had not received assistance:

As a judicial officer we aren't allowed to give advice to the litigants. There's a huge difference between saying you know I really can't tell you that, I can't be your lawyer, I can't help you; and saying I can't tell you that but here's a place where you can go to get some assistance. Just totally diffuses the tension. Totally changes the attitude of the people—makes them sense that someone cares, someone is listening and so they walk out with a purpose as opposed to walking out with question marks and anger.

It should be self-evident that judicial resources are conserved if pleadings are properly completed and the evidence presented is well organized and relevant. In addition, orders that are clearly written and specific are more likely to be enforceable on their face (without further hearings to clarify ambiguities), thereby further conserving judicial resources and enabling justice to be accomplished in a timely manner.

Self-help centers can save clerk time

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

I have to think the workshops are helping us get people through, and not only is that good for litigants, it obviously is good for us, because it saves us reprocessing the same judgment over and over again. So, if they have problems with it we can send them to a workshop or to another self-help group we have and they get it fixed, and can then submit it in a way that we can accept it, which is what we want to do.

Meanwhile another administrator explained why it was important for them not to have to see litigants several times regarding the same filing:

The idea is we don't have the time or the staff to be reading the same judgment two or three times until somebody gets it right. And the party doesn't want to have to redo it two and three times, it's a lot of work. So if we can bring them in and get them into a workshop and they go through it one time, people are there to answer their questions and to help them out and it just sails.

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

One aspect of fairness is having the same court procedures for everyone with similar legal problems. Inconsistent procedures can lead to perceived unfairness, and in some cases actual unfairness. These court professionals noted that the presence of self-help centers in their courthouse led to new discussions about how filings should be processed, and helped create more uniform processes. Lack of uniform processes was an issue for some litigants who, as noted above, complained about not being able to get consistent answers from people in the courthouse about what needed to be done, or what to expect in their cases. The process spurred by the self-help centers was described by one administrator:

[Y]ou ... gain from the presence of a really strong self help movement here administratively in a way that I hadn't anticipated. We have learned so much from the people working with the unrepresented or self represented litigants so that we have improved our processing of judgments and our rejection sheet because now we understand better how confusing it is for people. If you don't work closely with someone who does self help, you tend to do things from your operations point of view ... this is how you do things ... this is the requirement. But if you're informed ... about what the litigants need, you start thinking differently. Instead of just thinking ... we're going to look for things to reject essentially, ... you start thinking, well wait a minute, who's going to understand this? ... So then you start changing your rejection sheet, then you start training people on how to do judgments and what we're looking for and that makes your rejection rate go down as well.

Another administrator captured well the change in staff attitude these changes reflected, one well captured by the phrase "How can I help you?": "You know the first thing that we had to do was we were always looking at the judgments in terms of rejection. Now, our own thing is look at them in terms of getting them through. Getting the judgment signed ,what do we need, rather than oh this is wrong, kick it."

Opinions about court system

For those who had prior experience with courts, especially as unrepresented litigants, the view was not particularly positive: "I didn't think it was this friendly, honestly. Because when you're dealing with court and judge you think it's like the worst..." What these customers indicated they wanted, in addition to help filing out forms, was some practical advice about what to expect going into court: "So that's the first thing they should tell you. ... they should be more informative as far as how it is going to be. Be more real. That's what I'm looking for, not just you know standards and regulations and procedures, go be real with the people and say "Hey man, this is what's going to happen." You know, so other people can really be prepare

themselves for it.” In addition to more information about how the system works, this customer (whose views were echoed by others) also wanted some clear answers, and the lack of certainty for him was obviously unsettling: “[E]verybody has something different to tell you and nobody gives the ... same answer to the same question. And that just makes you even more fearful when you’re walking through the doors. And those who haven’t experienced it in court, it’s a nightmare.”

VI. Summary

Answers To Research Questions

The focus group participants explained that they were representing themselves primarily because they had tried to find an affordable attorney or paralegal but were unable to do so. The aspect of the service that they found most helpful was that they were able to get prompt, individualized answers to their questions. While they reported understanding the procedural issues in their case better as a result of going to the centers, progress in understanding their legal issues appeared to be more limited. These customers credited the centers with providing crucial assistance in moving their cases forward, and creating in them a more positive view of the court system. If the centers had not been available, most reported that they probably would have endured continued delays in getting their legal problem resolved. Finally, these customers reported being treated fairly and respectfully by the center staff, and in particular the JusticeCorps volunteers.

Programmatic Insights

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

Effect Of JusticeCorps Volunteers

A general question was raised at the beginning of this study regarding the effectiveness of JusticeCorps volunteers beyond helping the court system, and the real impact of their services on the litigants’ lives and legal problems. These focus groups indicate that JusticeCorps students do have a real and positive impact on the lives of the litigants. They provide direct emotional support and technical assistance that allows customers to make concrete, positive progress toward resolving legal problems that are plaguing them in important areas of their lives such as housing, marriage, and family relationships. Often, these problems are seen as preventing the litigants from moving ahead with their lives, and potentially preoccupying them to the detriment of their children and loved ones. While evidence of the direct impact on children was slight, it does not take too much imagination to understand that a parent faced with a major legal problem

such as an eviction or unresolved divorce or child custody issue is very likely devoting time, energy, and attention to that problem which could better be spent elsewhere.

Appendix A

Methodology

1. Pilot and Design Work

Prior to organizing the study, two CFCC researchers conducted pilot work to determine its feasibility and develop research questions. Part one of this work consisted of a 3 day site visit to several court based self-help centers. The centers offered a varied, and varying, array of services and were spread across Los Angeles County. The services included divorce (marriage dissolution) workshops and individual assistance with divorces, domestic violence restraining orders, evictions (unlawful detainer), small claims actions, and a special program that brought individuals whose divorce actions had stalled back into court to finish them. The researchers conducted individual interviews with customers, JusticeCorps students, self-help center staff (managers, attorneys, and paralegals), administrative personnel within the courts, and court clerks. A formal focus group was conducted with former JusticeCorps students who were then coordinating on-campus recruitment, and several informal focus groups were held with center customers. Observations were made of several services and sites covering each of the types of services mentioned above. Finally, administrative data concerning caseload and caseloads was reviewed.

Part two of the pilot work involved holding two focus groups, in two different neighboring counties, that consisted of legal aid clients and self-help center customers. These groups were held in Winter, 2005 and demonstrated the logistical feasibility of successfully completing such focus groups, as well as providing valuable insights into the types of questions needed to elicit the information being sought.

Following this fieldwork, discussions were held between CFCC staff, AOC staff, and Los Angeles County Superior Court Self-Help Center staff to formulate the research questions set out above. A write-up of the pilot focus groups was completed, and a design plan for the current study was written that described the responsibilities of the various partners in the research, and set out the research questions and a detailed script for the focus groups. The plan also described the recruitment strategy and schedule for each of the planned focus groups, a detailed job description for participant recruiters and site coordinators, and solicitation materials for use in recruiting participants.

2. Study Population

This study gathered data from customers of court based self-help centers served by JusticeCorps students in the Los Angeles County Superior Court. Seven groups were eventually held representing different locations, services, customers, and providers within the court system. The physical locations covered were the Stanley Mosk courthouse in Central Los Angeles (4), Pomona (2), and Van Nuys (1). The languages used were English and Spanish, with one group being conducted entirely in Spanish. The legal issues covered were divorce (marriage dissolution), completing unfinished cases to final judgment (both divorce and consumer cases),

eviction (unlawful detainer), and name changes. The types of services represented were workshops (1) and individual assistance (4). The two non-customer groups, court staff and JusticeCorps students, were both held at the courthouse in Central Los Angeles.

Of the seven focus groups that were held, each had a different population or type of service (e.g., Spanish speaking customers, dissolution workshops, or individual assistance). One group consisted of participants in a divorce workshop. Three others covered individual types of self-help assistance in dissolution, eviction, and other types of family law cases in two different locations. One of those groups was conducted completely in Spanish. Yet another group consisted of people who were getting assistance completing cases that had remained open for a long period of time. A sixth focus group was held for court personnel, including judges, who were affected by the self-help centers and the JusticeCorps students in particular. Finally, a focus group made up of current JusticeCorps students was conducted to get their opinions about the program, and how it might be improved.

Overall, 25 customers participated. Their ages ranged from 25 to 52, with most in their mid-30's or early 40's. About two-thirds of the participants were women, with one-third being men. Almost all the participants were English speaking Hispanic, with only one Caucasian and one African-American attending. One focus group was held entirely in Spanish, the rest in English – though in most cases the groups included at least one individual who preferred to communicate in Spanish. Overall, ten people said they usually spoke English at home, nine said Spanish, and six were mixed. A Spanish speaking focus group facilitator was present at all times to communicate in Spanish with those who preferred to speak Spanish.

Most of the people were employed, but had fairly low monthly incomes (under \$1,200 per month). Education levels ranged from eighth grade or below to a graduate or professional degree, with most having some high school, a high school diploma, or some college. Participants were fairly evenly distributed regarding whether they were married, single, separated, or divorced. Most households contained one or two adults, but a few had as many as four or five. Five households had no children, most had one or two, and the range ran up to five. Only one participant was listed as disabled, and that was a temporary condition.

3. Instruments

The primary data was gathered using a focus group methodology. The groups were conducted following a written script that contained questions and follow-up probes designed to elicit factual statements, narrative stories, and statements of opinion that addressed the research questions listed above. This script was based in part on the focus group questions developed during the pilot phase, as described above. A sample script is attached as Appendix A. Actual scripts for each group varied slightly to address issues particular to the experiences of the participants of that group. A table matching the research questions described above with the focus group script is attached as Appendix B. The results are reported below.

In addition to responding to the focus group questions, each participant in the customer focus groups was asked to complete a brief survey listing the following characteristics: Primary language used at home; Sex; Ethnicity; Age; Income source; Income; Education (highest grade

completed); Marital status; Adults in household; Children in household; and Whether disabled. The results are reported in section 2, above.

4. Data Collection Process

The five customer groups varied in size from three to eight people, and each was recruited from a list of potential participants the had between 20 and 30 names (with the exception of the dissolution workshop, which was recruited from a group of 12 attendees). Two site coordinators were responsible for overseeing the recruiters, who recruited participants via phone calls from lists of past center customers. The recruiting calls were made over a period of three to four weeks preceding the group. The lists consisted of customers who had been served at the centers in the preceding few months, and for whom the centers had obtained contact information through their regular record keeping processes. Potential participants were informed of their rights as human subjects in research at the time of recruitment, in accordance with section 5, below. The site coordinators also made arrangements for rooms in which to hold the groups, and took care of other logistical details.

Each group was run by two researchers from CFCC. One researcher served as the facilitator, while the other performed the duties of note taker and recorder. The researchers alternated in these duties. Note takers wrote detailed, real-time notes for each group, while the facilitator posed questions and probes according to the focus group script set out in Appendix A. Time keeping was the responsibility of the note taker.

Participants were given gift cards from a local department store and dinner as compensation for their participation. The groups were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Following each group, the participants were asked to fill out a brief survey that listed the personal characteristics described in section 3, above. The note taker for each group was responsible for administering the survey.

Each group lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours, with 30 minutes prior being devoted to informal discussion, eating, and sound checks. Approximately 30 minutes following the group was allowed for individual follow-up with participants, note recording, tape labeling, and clean-up.

The rooms in which the focus groups were held were organized in a 'round-table' fashion, as nearly as possible. Food was off to one side, and the recording equipment was in the middle. In a couple cases, participants brought partners, who were allowed to join the groups. Similarly, invited participants who arrived late were allowed to join in. Overall, the groups were relaxed and convivial. Even when discussing difficult personal matters or feedback critical of the services, participants maintained a supportive and constructive tone. There was a good deal of cross-talk and discussion, along with the sharing of useful information and experiences.

Two rounds of focus groups were conducted. The first, in late winter 2006, consisted of three groups (two customer groups and one group of court personnel). The second, about five weeks later, consisted of four groups (three customer groups and one group of JusticeCorps students). Most of the customer groups were held in the early evening, from 6 to 8 p.m. One customer group was held over lunch, as were the court staff and student groups.

5. *Protection of Human Subjects*

All research was conducted with the informed consent of the participants. All participants were free to leave the study at any time, without any negative consequences (though none chose to leave). Promised incentives were given to participants who arrived for the groups at any time, though none arrived later than one third of the way through the process. The identity of the participants is confidential, and no information was collected by the researchers at the Center for Families, Children & the Courts that would allow for the identification of those who took part. Researchers did not have access to the recruiter lists, and only first names were requested as identifiers during the group. Every effort has been made to ensure that no personally identifying information has been used in study reports, or other distribution or use of the data.

Recruiting staff was responsible for informing potential participants at the time of their recruitment of their rights as human subjects of social science research. The facilitators reminded participants prior to the beginning of each focus group of their rights as human subjects. Participants were also given a written statement of their rights, in English or Spanish, as appropriate (Appendix D). Participants were only asked to give their consent verbally. They were not asked to sign any written consent forms.

6. *Analysis and Reporting*

Each tape recorded focus group was transcribed. Spanish language sections were translated into English and transcribed. The transcriptions were read multiple times, each with a different purpose. An initial reading of the transcripts was done to gain an overview of the tone and substance of the groups. Notes taken during the groups were also reviewed to ensure that nothing important had been missed by the recordings. Following this, the transcripts were entered into a qualitative data analysis program to facilitate coding. Coding was initially done according to the responses relevant to the nine research questions described above, and to parcel out contextual details of individual legal problems and life descriptions. During this time, emerging themes were noted and coded preliminarily. Finally, transcripts were reviewed again to accomplish a more thorough coding of the emergent themes and insights. As described below, many of these related to the experiences and understandings of the customers. Others shed light on the impact of the centers and JusticeCorps students on the courts, and the experiences and learning of the students themselves.

The results reported are a compilation of the dialogues that took place in the focus groups described in the previous section. Except for the demographic descriptions of the participants, no numerical data is given, and none should be implied by the use of terms such as “consensus,” “many,” or “majority.” The term *consensus* is used to describe a point about which there was general agreement, either within or across groups, and about which no countervailing opinion was voiced. Other terms such as *many*, *majority*, *most*, or *almost all* should be taken at their colloquial meanings, and understood to represent only a general impression about the number of individuals voicing that opinion. In those cases in which there were important disagreements, the opposing points of view are noted.

Every effort has been made to quote only those statements that could not lead to the identification of the speaker. In addition, in most cases quotes are not attributed to any particular

group (also in order to maintain confidentiality), unless the failure to do so would render the point being made unreliable. For example, only participants in the workshop focus group could have a valid opinion about the worth of that workshop in assisting them. Unless specifically stated, statements attributable to litigants were not contradicted by student volunteers or court staff, and vice-versa.

The data are reported via a combination of textual summaries of focus group dialogue, and verbatim quotes from the speakers. Where possible, verbatim quotes are used to illustrate a point. In other cases, either because of confidentiality concerns or because a point could be gleaned only after reading a lengthy verbatim quote, summaries of what was said are reported.

Generalizability of Results

A major question with any qualitative study is the generalizability of the results. Resources being limited, the time taken to question, probe, explore meanings, and get in-depth responses about complex situations necessarily restricts the number of people that can be studied. While no qualitative study can claim to be statistically representative of a large population, certain indicators of generalizability can nonetheless be achieved. Chief among these is whether the same points or experiences are being talked about across different groups, held in different places, and at different times. Another indicator is whether groups reach consensus within themselves about the various topics they explore. Finally, if different types of participants in a common phenomenon report similar observations and reactions, another indicator of generalizability is achieved.

In the present study, the major points reported below were widely, if not universally, agreed on by participants in all the groups. In short, we heard the same stories, problems, and benefits over and over again. This should provide the reader with some assurance that the results are worth considering, and, if needed, useful in formulating future research that confirms them more broadly, or explores them more deeply.

The results are presented first as direct, but brief, answers to the research questions the study was initially designed to answer. Following that, the results are organized around themes that, while speaking to the research questions, are more in line with how litigants experience the court system and self-help services.

Appendix B

Focus Group Script

NOTE: Be aware throughout that you are collecting information about the overall impact of the assistance on participants' lives, how they were treated by others in the system, and what they thought and felt about those two issues. These issues will be addressed throughout the group.

The focus group facilitator should be thoroughly familiar with the script below, and use the written text only as a reminder of the questions to be covered. It will often be the case that these questions will be spontaneously addressed by the group without having to be prompted, and out of the order presented below. When this happens, the facilitator and note taker should separately note that this has occurred and confer from time to time that the necessary topics are being covered. If, in moving through the script, it appears a question has already been addressed, the facilitator need only ask if there are any additional comments on that topic.

Introductory Steps

As participants arrive, greet them, have them sit down and put their names on their place cards. Attend to any immediate needs of participants. Room arrangement and equipment set-up should be done beforehand.

Let people get dinner.

Briefly introduce facilitator, note taker, and anyone else in the room who is not a participant.

Review and distribute informed consent information, confirm that taping is okay, and answer any questions people might have about the study.

Focus group (taping should begin now)

Briefly remind people why they are here: To tell us about their experience with the self-help center (describe the location and layout of the center to remind people about who helped them), and what impact it had on their lives and legal problem.

1. Start the group by going around the table and asking people to introduce themselves by their first name (they'll also have place cards in front of them to write their name on), briefly describe the legal problem for which they needed help, and how they were assisted. Probe for:

- How people found out about the help they eventually received.
 - Whether people think the way they found out about help was acceptable, and if not, what would have worked better for them.
 - How common or usual they think their own experience was.
2. Are you satisfied with the assistance you received from the center? Why or why not? Probe for:
- What would have made people satisfied if they were not.
 - Whether people would return for additional assistance, if it were available.
 - Whether participants would recommend the service to others, particularly family or friends who might be facing the same or a similar situation.
 - Whether people felt they adequately understood what they needed to do, and why or why not.
3. Did the services from the self-help center make a difference in how you handled your case? Probe for:
- Whether they felt they understood how the court system worked regarding their particular case, whether they thought it was important for them to understand how the system worked, and why.
 - Whether they felt they were better able to make a good decision about their situation, and why.
 - Whether their views of the court system and their case changed as a result of going to the center.
4. What might you have done if these services weren't available? Probe for:
- Other types of assistance have people gotten with their problem.
 - Other kinds of experiences people have had with the legal system.
 - Whether people considered hiring an attorney to assist them? Why/why not?
 - Whether their hypothesized result might be common in their communities.
5. What difference has this service made in your life – what would you say the overall effect is? Probe for:

- The effect of the service on their case.
 - The effect the case has had on their lives (e.g., getting a divorce finalized – what has this meant for yourself and your children, or a small claims matter settled – what difference has this made for you).
6. How would you say you've been treated by people you've come into contact with around this case? Probe for:
- By the judge(s).
 - By the court personnel.
 - By the self-help center staff.
 - By the people in the blue shirts (the JusticeCorps students).
 - By others.

Conclusion and wrap-up

Announce that we are almost out of time, and invite anyone with a burning issue to speak up.

Sincerely thank the participants for their time, and being willing to share their personal experiences and thoughts with you.

Assure people that, while they will not be personally identified, their thoughts and experiences will be used to make the services better for others who are in their position in the future.

Invite people to contact us if they have any questions in the future.

Secure and label all tapes and notes.

Clean-up and rearrange room as appropriate.

Debrief and type up notes as soon as possible.

Appendix C

Table Matching Research Questions With Focus Group Questions	
<p>1. Why are litigants representing themselves in court?</p>	<p>1. Start the group by going around the table and asking people to introduce themselves by their first name (they'll also have place cards in front of them to write their name on), briefly describe the legal problem for which they needed help, and how they were assisted (e.g., self-help center, limited or brief assistance, full legal representation). Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> How people found out about the help they eventually received. <input type="checkbox"/> Whether people think the way they found out about help was acceptable, and if not, what would have worked better for them. <input type="checkbox"/> How common or usual they think their own experience was. <p>4. Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether people considered hiring an attorney to assist them? Why/why not?
<p>2. What types of services are or would be most helpful?</p>	<p>2. Are you satisfied with the assistance you received from the center? Why or why not? Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What would have made people satisfied if they were not. <input type="checkbox"/> Whether people would return for additional assistance, if it were available. <input type="checkbox"/> Whether participants would recommend the service to others, particularly family or friends who might be facing the same or a similar situation.
<p>3. Do the services help customers better understand the court system?</p>	<p>2. Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether people felt they adequately understood what they needed to do, and why or why not.

<p>4. Do the services help customers better understand their specific legal matter?</p>	<p>2. Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether people felt they adequately understood what they needed to do, and why or why not. <p>3. Did the services from the self-help center make a difference in how you handled your case? Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether they understood how the court system worked regarding their particular case, whether they thought it was important for them to understand, and why.
<p>5. How have the services impacted the customers' decisions and actions (most important overall issue)?</p>	<p>3. Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether they felt they were better able to make a good decision about their situation, and why.
<p>6. What would the customers have done in the absence of the services?</p>	<p>4. What might you have done if these services weren't available? Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Other types of assistance have people gotten with their problem. <input type="checkbox"/> Other kinds of experiences people have had with the legal system. <input type="checkbox"/> Whether their hypothesized result might be common in their communities.
<p>7. Did the perception of the customer change as a result of the services received from the self-help center?</p>	<p>3. Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Whether their views of the court system and their case changed as a result of going to the center.
<p>8. What is the impact of JusticeCorps services on customers' lives, especially with regard to their children?</p>	<p>5. What difference has this service made in your life – what would you say the overall effect is? Probe for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> The effect of the service on their case. <input type="checkbox"/> The effect the case has had on their lives (e.g., getting a divorce finalized – what has this meant for yourself and your children, or a small claims matter settled – what difference has this made for you).

9. Do customers feel they were treated fairly and respectfully? ⁴	6. How would you say you've been treated by people you've come into contact with around this case? Probe for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> By the judge(s).<input type="checkbox"/> By the court personnel.<input type="checkbox"/> By the self-help center staff.<input type="checkbox"/> By the people in the blue shirts.<input type="checkbox"/> By others.
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⁴ These are questions of procedural justice, and may focus primarily on the effect of the service and the treatment received from self-help center staff.

Appendix D

Informed Consent

This focus group is being held to gather information about the client community that uses legal self help centers involving JusticeCorps volunteers and the effectiveness and impact of some of their services. Your participation in the project is greatly appreciated. Listed below are some of the conditions of your participation in this focus group.

- You are free to leave at any time, without any negative consequences.
- Any incentives are yours whether you decide to leave immediately or at any time during this focus group.
- Your identity will be kept confidential.
- No personally identifying information will be used in any reports from the study, or other distribution or use of the data.
- Your participation in this study will in no way affect your case.
- The data gathered here will be used in a report to program funders and in the efforts to improve program performance for the community.

If you have any questions or would like a copy of the ensuing report, please contact:

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Consentimiento Informado

Este grupo del foco se tiene para conseguir información acerca de la comunidad de cliente que utiliza servicios legales de auto ayuda con voluntarios JusticeCorps y la eficacia y el impacto de algunos de sus servicios. Su participación en el proyecto se aprecia mucho. Lista abajo están algunas de las condiciones de su participación en este grupo del foco.

- Usted es libre salir en cualquier momento, sin alguna consecuencia negativa.
- Los incentivos son suyos si usted decide salir inmediatamente o a cualquier tiempo durante este grupo del foco.
- Su identidad se mantendrá confidencial. Ninguna información personalmente de identificación se utilizará en cualquier informe del estudio, o de otra distribución o el uso de los datos.
- Su participación en este estudio no afecta de ninguna manera su caso.
- Los datos reunidos aquí serán utilizado en un informe para ayudar en los esfuerzos de mejorar el desempeño del programa para la comunidad.

Si usted tiene cualquier pregunta o desea una copia del informe que resulta, por favor contacte:

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