

## Chapter 6

# Los Angeles County: Urban Coordination Model

### PROGRAM SNAPSHOT MODEL TYPE: URBAN COORDINATION MODEL

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>Location:</b>          | Office in Central courthouse, but services provided to organizations countywide   |
| <b>Staffing:</b>          | Managing attorney: 1.0 FTE<br>Assistant attorney: .5 FTE  |
| <b>Target Population:</b> | Self-help service providers in Los Angeles County   |
| <b>Services Provided:</b> | Coordination of activities among providers<br>Communication and information sharing among providers<br>Dissemination of best practices<br>Support in the development of new self-help centers<br>Resource development |

### Background

Los Angeles County has 9.5 million residents, and it is one of the nation's largest counties with 4,084 square miles, an area some 800 square miles larger than the combined area of the states of Delaware and Rhode Island. There are 58 court locations in Los Angeles County; 429 judicial officers, 160 commissioners, and 5,566 court employees<sup>48</sup>; and hundreds of thousands of self-represented litigants. More than 40 agencies provide some sort of services for self-represented litigants, but there is little or no coordination among them. As a result, customers often are not referred to appropriate services. Thousands of self-represented litigants receive assistance from these programs every month, but the need for services continues to be far greater than the programs can provide. Furthermore, many self-represented litigants speak limited English, making access to appropriate services and the court system that much more difficult. Self-represented litigants face a number of barriers. Navigating the court system can be difficult for highly educated individuals with ample resources, and it is all the more difficult for those with limited literacy and a host of poverty-related difficulties.

### Description of Model

Unlike the four other self-help pilot projects, the Los Angeles Self-Help Management Project is not a direct service model. Whereas self-represented litigants are themselves the customers of the other projects, customers of the Los Angeles Self-Help Management Project are self-help service providers. The goals of the project are:

<sup>48</sup> Numbers of judicial officers and court staff are reported as of July 2001.

- To increase access to justice through the development of partnerships with various legal services providers, bar groups, and schools;
- To leverage resources to expand and enhance self-help and low-cost legal services; and
- To decrease the number of cases involving self-represented litigants that impede court efficiency due to improperly prepared pleadings, lack of preparation for hearings, or failure to complete judgments and written orders after hearing.

The Self-Help Management Project was developed to assist with the establishment of new self-help centers as well as to support and coordinate existing self-help services across multiple agencies in the county. The goals and focus areas of the Los Angeles project stem from the county's size.

The Self-Help Management Project has several focus areas for reaching the goals outlined above. First, the management project is to serve as a vehicle for gathering information on all the providers in the county to document what agencies exist, to determine what services are being provided, to identify duplication in services, and to uncover discrepancies in the content and quality of services provided. In addition, the management project focuses on identifying helpful materials and best practices, so they can be disseminated among providers with the goal of ensuring the consistency and quality of services and referrals. Another key component to the management project is to foster communication and collaboration among providers and to facilitate service provision both within individual agencies and across agencies.

### **Project Planning and Start-Up**

Los Angeles is an urban county with a diverse population, both ethnically and economically. The county is home to a large and complex web of public and private service providers. Many agencies provide some services for self-represented litigants, including several court-based self-help centers. These centers vary in the type and extent of services they offer, from those that give referrals only to those that provide consultations with attorneys, workshops, or other hands-on assistance. Many of these providers focus on family law and domestic violence, but some focus on other areas of law, including unlawful detainees and guardianships. Two large nonprofits run many of the self-help centers located in the courts and in the community: Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) and the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA). In addition to the programs run by these agencies, there are a variety of independent nonprofit service providers that offer self-help services. The county also has the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, which is located in 12 sites, and Family Law Information Centers located in two sites. The Department of Consumer Affairs provides small claims assistance by phone and at seven locations.

Despite the many agencies providing some services for self-represented litigants, judges and court staff were concerned about the lack of coordination among the agencies. Often,

customers are not referred to appropriate services and the huge needs in Los Angeles County remain unmet by existing services. The Office of the Family Law Facilitator reports that people line up for services as early as 5:30 a.m.; other programs consistently have to turn needy litigants away. Due to lack of coordination, duplicate materials describing the same process have been created so that, for instance, there are multiple versions of guides on how to get a divorce in Los Angeles, all of them written, updated, and maintained by different programs. In 2002-2003, 122,700 new family law cases were filed in Los Angeles, many of which will require multiple hearings. Also filed were 182,367 limited civil cases involving matters under \$25,000 per year, which cover landlord-tenant disputes and small contract matters. Limited civil cases generally are handled without attorneys because litigants cannot afford professional assistance. In addition, 112,379 small claims matters were filed.

The Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) grant amount, \$166,400 per year, can make a significant impact in many jurisdictions throughout the state, but it clearly could not meet the needs of a large portion of Los Angeles residents needing assistance. What the grant could do was to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of existing services, make the court system easier to navigate for self-represented litigants, and increase the resources of existing services while leveraging them to be as effective as possible. By identifying existing resources, the project could help to prevent duplication of efforts and support the excellent work that programs currently provide.

Representatives of the Los Angeles court became interested in the idea of a self-help management center. The court conducted a strategic planning process several years ago that included a needs assessment and a vision and mission statement. This process highlighted the fact that there are multiple self-help providers but little knowledge about the type, quality, and extent of services provided. The urban collaboration model of the self-help pilot project was appealing to the Los Angeles planners because it addressed an identified need in the county and responded to the growing momentum to provide court-based self-help centers. Two new programs had just been established, and plans were in the works to create others. Coordination of those efforts was timely. Once funded, office space for the Self-Help Management Project was secured in the central courthouse, and the court hired a managing attorney to implement the project. The managing attorney then hired a part-time assistant attorney.

### Court Environment Surrounding Self-Help Services

The Los Angeles court has a long history of working with legal services programs to provide resources for self-represented litigants. Starting with the Maynard Toll advice program offered by the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles in 1988, the court has allowed a variety of self-help programs to use courthouse facilities. Most court facilities have domestic violence projects aimed at serving victims.

In 1999, the Self-Help Legal Access Center was opened as a pilot project at the Van Nuys courthouse, with funding provided by the Los Angeles County Board of

Supervisors and administered by the county Department of Consumer Affairs. The project provides self-help assistance with family law, landlord-tenant issues, and simple civil matters by helping litigants complete forms and learn about the court process. This service, provided by Neighborhood Legal Services, has proved to be extremely successful. In 2003, the Self-Help Legal Access Center received an award from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Commission for Productivity and Quality. The program was expanded to the Pomona and Inglewood courthouses on a full-time basis in January 2003 and to Antelope Valley on a part-time basis in 2003 and full-time in 2004.

The numbers of litigants served at these court-based projects is detailed in figure 6.1.

**Figure 6.1  
Customers Served by Self-Help Legal Access Centers**

|                 | <b>1/1/03 – 12/31/03</b> | <b>1/1/04 – 6/30/04</b> | <b>Anticipated Total 2004</b> |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Van Nuys        | 18,300                   | 7,372                   | 14,744                        |
| Pomona          | 7,945                    | 6,129                   | 12,258                        |
| Inglewood       | 5,201                    | 3,092                   | 6,184                         |
| Antelope Valley | 3,838                    | 2,827                   | 5,654                         |
| Total           | 35,284                   | 19,420                  | 38,840                        |

Given the large number of court locations, the Superior Court's action plan for serving self-represented litigants, *Pointing Self-Represented Litigants in the Right Direction*, envisions a core of self-help offices working in partnership with a legal services agency such as Neighborhood Legal Services, along with minimally staffed centers in other locations where litigants can obtain brochures and use computer resources to obtain information and complete common forms. The first of these self-help offices was established in the law library of the Long Beach courthouse in April 2003. The site provided equipment, public access computers programmed with a portal page to I-CAN! software, and Web links including the Judicial Council's self-help site.

In September 2004, a self-help center opened at the Compton courthouse with funding from a state bar grant obtained by Community Legal Services (a branch of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County.) Public access computers with I-CAN! software supplement direct services by legal aid staff. This combined use of in-person assistance and technology is designed to serve litigants as efficiently as possible.

In addition, the court has used grant funds to expand self-help activities by court staff. The Office of the Family Law Facilitator served 9,636 people with child support problems during the first three quarters in 2004, for a projected total of 12,848 for the year.

The Family Law Information Center was founded in 2000 and provides services at the Central and Norwalk courthouses. Through telephone and walk-in services, along with workshops and correspondence, it served 14,672 people in the first six months of 2004, for a projected total of 29,344 for the year.

## Service Staffing

The Self-Help Management Project has two staff members: a full-time managing attorney and a part-time assistant attorney. The managing attorney's skills and qualifications closely match the project's requirements. The managing attorney is an experienced family law attorney who founded a nonprofit legal aid center. In addition, she has a variety of other relevant experience and skills. For example, as founder of a parents group that is active with the Los Angeles Unified School District, the managing attorney learned how to navigate political arenas, forge collaborations, and get diverse groups of people to work together. The managing attorney is responsible for grant management, supervising the assistant attorney, creating a presence for the management project among local providers, setting goals for the project, and conducting all project activities (as described below) with the help of the assistant attorney.

The assistant attorney works half-time for the management project, and her duties have included conducting dissolution workshops, training JusticeCorps volunteers, visiting self-help centers to gather information about the services they provide, and creating visibility for the management project. No clerical staff are employed, although people interviewed by the evaluation team during site visits (hereafter respondents; see Appendix B) indicated that administrative support would be welcome.

## Analysis of Agencies Served

The Self-Help Management Project has engaged in a wide variety of activities, including communication and collaboration, dissemination of best practices, support for new self-help centers, and resource development (see figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2**  
**Activities of the Los Angeles Self Help Management Project**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Collaboration          | Hosts monthly meetings with centers<br>Attends pro per meetings  |
| Communication          | Manages listserv<br>Phone assistance<br>Site visits  |
| Dissemination          | Model dissolution workshops<br>Forms packets<br>Form development   |
| Support to new centers | Assists in center startups<br>I-CAN! project<br>Co-locating Central self-help projects<br>Pro per day in Antelope Valley |
| Resource development   | JusticeCorps—100 paid internships<br>Grant funds from AOC  |

### **Targeted Agencies**

The management project was established to facilitate collaboration and communication among Los Angeles County's disparate self-help providers. To this end, as documented in the monthly activity logs, project staff have established some degree of communication or shared activities with more than 20 nonprofit agencies, multiple judges and bench officers, staff in the Office of the Family Law Facilitator and Family Law Information Center, other court departments (including court administrators, court counsel, contracts officers, and technology support staff), county departments (including the Department of Consumer Affairs), and bar associations and law schools.

Many of the management project's activities focus on a core group of agencies and court-based services. Establishing strong working relationships within the courts and with court-based self-help providers was a logical first step. As documented in the monthly activity logs, the agencies most involved with the management project's work include NLS and LAFLA, the two major agencies that operate court-based self-help centers; Community Legal Services (CLS), which also operates court-based self-help centers; the Harriet Buhai Center for Family Law; the Levitt and Quinn Family Law Center; the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, the Family Law Information Center, judges and bench officers, and other court and county departments.

Telephone interviews conducted by the evaluation team with Los Angeles area self-help agencies in Spring 2003 and Spring 2004 provided information about the training and technical assistance needs of these providers. (See Appendix I for a list of agencies participating in the evaluation telephone survey.) Although some telephone respondents indicated they were familiar with other agencies' policies and procedures, half were not. Most respondents expressed strong interest in a wide variety of training and technical assistance. Telephone respondents provided a long list of topic areas for which they would appreciate technical assistance, as described below.

**Improved communication with the court.** Several respondents indicated they would like help forging relationships with judges and other court personnel, including the Family Law Information Centers and family law facilitators. These respondents said they would welcome the opportunity to speak with judges and other court staff about issues surrounding self-represented litigants, but they were unsure how to initiate such meetings. Respondents also expressed interest in help to navigate the different procedures used in different courts or perhaps to attempt to standardize procedures across courts.

**Networking opportunities.** Respondents indicated they would appreciate more opportunities to meet with and learn from other self-help providers, as well as more communication with other community groups.

**Staff training.** Self-help centers are staffed by individuals with varying backgrounds and skill levels, including attorneys, paralegals, students, and volunteers. Some respondents expressed a desire for staff training provided by an outside agency instead of in-house.

**Training in substantive areas of the law.** Although staff at self-help centers are knowledgeable about areas of law their centers cover, respondents indicated that staff could benefit from additional training. Furthermore, some agencies have plans to expand the areas of law that they cover. Respondents expressed a desire for training in eight areas of the law:

- General family law;
- Dissolutions, especially contested dissolutions;
- Conservatorships;
- Bankruptcies;
- Immigration law;
- Housing law;
- Education law; and
- Health care law.

**Other needs.** Respondents also expressed the need for assistance in several other areas, including information technology, staff and volunteer recruitment, and updates on new developments in government regulations and benefits. Respondents also expressed the desire to have a “point person” they could contact with questions and needs and another who could discuss available resources and court processes.

#### Description of Service Delivery

Many of the management project’s activities described below address the technical assistance needs identified by the telephone respondents.

#### **Collaboration**

The Self-Help Management Project is involved with numerous collaborative efforts, as documented on the monthly activity logs. Indeed, according to these logs, between May 2003 and April 2004, the management project hosted 64 meetings, and its staff attended 84 meetings put on by other agencies. The management project’s activities are described below, and include *pro per* provider meetings and networking lunches, collaborations with the Office of the Family Law Facilitator and the Family Law Information Center, and information dissemination and outreach. These efforts all link to the communication, networking, and staff training needs identified by the telephone respondents.

Within the court system, the Self-Help Management Project staff take part in *pro per* provider meetings chaired by the presiding family court judge. These meetings bring together court personnel and staff of various self-help centers, allowing court-based agencies to communicate with each other and with nonprofits and to clarify rules and procedures. For example, these meetings provide a forum for self-help center staff to

discuss inefficiencies and confusion in their dealings with the courts. The Self-Help Management Project's managing attorney can bring issues to the presiding judge that she hears from the providers who work in the various Los Angeles courts, and in turn, the judge can make decisions about how things should be standardized and then communicate this to the judges at the outlying courts. One respondent found that these meetings have become more fruitful as the management project's managing attorney has altered their focus; as relationships solidify, people share knowledge and information more freely. These meetings typically include representatives from a dozen or so organizations, and those who attend now represent more than just the central court. Staff of the self-help centers at the Pomona, Van Nuys, and Inglewood courts and of the Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice are new additions to the meetings as a result of to the managing attorney's suggestions.

In addition to attending the *proper* provider meetings, the Self-Help Management Project's managing attorney instituted monthly lunches for central courthouse program staff. These lunch meetings allow staff of the various projects working in the courthouse to get to know one another, to learn about the services each project offers, and to share ideas. The resulting familiarity has improved the seamlessness of referrals among the numerous programs operating within this single large courthouse.

One of the Self-Help Management Project's main collaborative partners is the Family Law Information Center (FLIC). The project's managing attorney has used a number of strategies to improve this collaboration and to build relationships between the FLIC and self-help providers. For example, the managing attorney was involved with fostering a new collaboration, called the Family Law Self-Help Center, which brings together FLIC, the family law facilitator, Infoline (an organization located in the central court that provides referrals and information to a broad array of services), and other providers within the central courthouse. These agencies now operate out of one location and also share a designated workshop space. The Office of the Family Law Facilitator provided the financial resources for the location, and the management project coordinated purchase of workshop equipment and organized an open house to announce the creation of the Family Law Self-Help Center and the Family Law Workshop space.

In addition to court staff and bench officers, staff from multiple self-help centers and nonprofits around Los Angeles County were invited to this open house, which provided opportunities for mingling and networking. The event included poster presentations on the services offered by each central courthouse program. The central court administrator attended this event and spoke for the first time with representatives of many community-based legal services providers. He is now an advocate of self-help activities and collaborations, and his recognition of their efforts was encouraging to the community agency staff, who enjoyed this opportunity to meet him and others among the court's leadership. In addition, this open house was the first time many of the county's service program operators met each other.

The court's commitment to support self-help programs was demonstrated by dedicating space for workshops in this overcrowded courthouse, and service providers recognized the significance. Previously, workshop providers had to use a courtroom that happened to be empty on the day of the workshop, making advanced planning difficult and causing confusion and delays at the start of every workshop. The consistent availability of the new workshop room encourages community agencies to partner with the court to present services within the courthouse. The management project is now organizing workshops by outside agencies to be held at the courthouse in collaboration with the Family Law Information Center.

The managing attorney has also participated on committees and task forces, including the committee that helped plan an annual conference on family law sponsored by the Legal Aid Association of California and the AOC. In this role, she solicited feedback from regional service providers and court staff and took their ideas back to the committee. In the second year of the conference, she organized a half-day training on issues specific to self-help programs, including intake, workshops, and new ways to provide services. The managing attorney also takes part in a relatively new task force formed to address the issue of *notario* fraud. This is a rapidly growing problem in Los Angeles: Many self-represented litigants pay large sums of money to individuals who then fraudulently or incorrectly complete their paperwork. The managing attorney has taken information and ideas from this task force out to the self-help centers in other courts.

### **Communication and Information Distribution**

Communicating within and outside of the courts has been an area of importance for the management project, and the managing attorney uses an e-mail distribution list to pass along information and materials to a wide variety of court-based and independent, nonprofit self-help service providers. The managing attorney has generated the distribution list through informal contacts and sign-in sheets from meetings, among other sources. She uses the distribution list to disseminate information from the Judicial Council, announce upcoming events, and share any other information that would be pertinent to self-help providers. The original proposal for this grant called for the creation of a Web site, but site visit respondents believe that the distribution list is a significantly more successful and cost-effective way of disseminating information. People may be more likely to read messages in their e-mail inbox than they are to check a Web site regularly for updates.

The distribution list is just one way that the management project provides information to self-help providers. In addition, the managing attorney serves as a resource to self-help providers, acting as the "point person" whose usefulness respondents to the phone survey described. One site visit respondent described the managing attorney as a "one-stop source where I can find out about everyone else." Another site visit respondent agreed, stating, "It is nice to call [the managing attorney] rather than having to hunt someone else down." Other respondents described the managing attorney as a "service provider for the service providers" and as "a member of our team." Site visit respondents explained that

the managing attorney can take things from the self-help centers to the central court for approval, something the centers could not do themselves. Similarly, according to site visit respondents, the managing attorney also is a central point of contact for people to provide feedback about Judicial Council forms. She compiles this feedback and provides it in an organized fashion to the AOC.

In addition to e-mail distribution of information, staff of the management project visit the court-based self-help centers regularly to meet with their staff and observe their operations. These visits provide an opportunity for self-help center staff to share needs and areas of concern; in addition, management project staff can provide ideas, resources, and information. For example, in the course of attending meetings with providers, the managing attorney learned that the self-help staff in one of the district courts had misunderstandings about what another court department provided. The managing attorney arranged a meeting between the two agencies and facilitated a discussion between them. The agencies were able to learn about the services each offered and the resource constraints faced by each. In addition, the managing attorney helped develop a cross-referral form that both agencies now use. The form refers customers from one agency to the other and explains why the referral was made and what services the customer needs.

### **Dissemination of Best Practices**

To reach the goal of increasing the number of cases in which self-represented litigants prepare their documents correctly, the management project has compiled and disseminated best practices, including model workshops that self-help centers can use. To this end, the management project, according to the monthly activity logs, has conducted 74 dissolution workshops to create a model workshop plan for centers to use.

This project is particularly critical because it appears that in Los Angeles, as in most counties throughout California, many more dissolution cases are filed than result in judgment. Since 1997, dissolution, legal separation, and annulment cases have been concluded only about 65 percent of the time. In 2003-2004, this figure increased to 77 percent (see figure 6.3).

**Figure 6.3**  
**Los Angeles: Historical Review of Dissolution Cases**  
**Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS)**

| Year             | 94-95  | 95-96  | 96-97  | 97-98  | 98-99  | 99-00  | 00-01  | 01-02  | 02-03  | 03-04  |
|------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Cases disposed   | 37,178 | 33,363 | 33,032 | 22,364 | 25,367 | 24,878 | 24,912 | 25,895 | 25,053 | 28,750 |
| Cases filed      | 37,107 | 38,026 | 37,501 | 35,706 | 36,738 | 38,551 | 38,850 | 40,468 | 38,811 | 37,307 |
| Percent disposed | 100%   | 88%    | 88%    | 63%    | 68%    | 65%    | 64%    | 64%    | 65%    | 77%    |

It is unclear why such a large percentage of cases are unresolved. Among self-represented litigants, a major reason may be that they do not know the multiple steps required to obtain a dissolution in California.<sup>49</sup> Most programs use three separate workshops to help litigants comply with the required steps, and few programs have found a way to assist litigants with the final stage of the divorce (preparing a judgment) in a group setting. By developing this full slate of workshops, the Self-Help Management Project enabled programs throughout the county to help litigants complete their dissolutions in a timely and effective manner.

Management project staff have conducted dissolution workshops for self-represented litigants and training sessions for self-help center staff in the use of the model workshop. The assistant attorney conducts dissolution workshops (an area of need identified by telephone respondents) at court-based self-help centers and at the Family Law Information Center. She also works collaboratively with other staff professionals to develop ways to present legal forms, language, courtroom etiquette, and other topics. Prior to conducting these workshops, the assistant attorney shared outlines and materials with self-help center staff to get feedback and buy-in regarding the way she structured the workshops. The management project has also secured permission from the Harriet Buhai Center for Family Law to use its dissolution manual as a model. Conducting workshops has enabled the assistant attorney to hear questions and concerns directly from self-represented litigants, allowing her to fine-tune the workshop model. In addition, the assistant attorney follows the cases of the people who take her workshops to track their progress and outcome. In this way, she is able to find out why judgments are rejected. In some cases, she has discovered errors on the clerks' part rather than on the litigants' part, and other cases have prompted her to modify her workshop content and format to ensure that other litigants do not make the same mistakes. The finished product of this work is a model consisting of three workshops that assist self-represented litigants from the beginning of the process, through discovery and request for default, all the way to judgment and declarations. Management project staff members have trained staff of the court-based self-help centers so that the latter can conduct the model workshops themselves.

The Divorce Workshop Series consists of three separate workshops, each lasting about four to five hours, covering all pleadings required to start and complete a dissolution of marriage. The series has been presented in four different courthouses, with one workshop at two different courthouses each week. From January 1, 2004, through October 31, 2004, the management project offered 74 workshops serving 590 litigants (see figure 6.4).

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<sup>49</sup> The San Diego Superior Court instituted a program in 2003 that required most people who had filed for divorce but had not completed their case within four months to participate in a status conference. Those litigants (the great majority of all people who had filed for divorce) were asked to complete an intake form, which asked among other things why their case wasn't completed. A common belief (24 percent) was that all a petitioner had to do to be divorced was to file a petition and summons, serve the other party, and wait six months. Another large group (19 percent) was waiting to hear something from the court.

**Figure 6.4**  
**Los Angeles Dissolution Workshops**

| Location    | Number of Workshops | Number of Litigants |
|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Torrance    | 20                  | 191                 |
| Long Beach* | 13                  | 78                  |
| Central     | 20                  | 134                 |
| Norwalk     | 21                  | 187                 |
| Total       | 74                  | 590                 |

\* The Long Beach location stopped providing workshops in August 2004.

The instructions are currently provided verbally with flipcharts as visual aids. Overhead projectors were used in the beginning but discarded. Plans for the future include use of videos, CDs, and computer software for portions of the workshop. Procedural information is covered extensively, and written instructions are also provided for some. Individual assistance is provided as needed by the attorney presenter at the workshop's conclusion.

Informal follow-up is conducted by the attorney presenter to determine any problems that come up as pleadings are processed, so workshop practices can be adjusted and the quality of the pleadings improved. Workshop participants return to their scheduled second and third workshops in the series and are able to get assistance regarding any interim problems with their pleadings. They are given the office number to call if they have problems getting the judgment processed. The staff attorney follows up with court clerks to determine solutions for any consistent problems.

The self-help legal access centers have all had staff trained to present the divorce workshop series, and the management project continues to work with them to support their delivery of this model. The management center is also working to recruit other workshop presenters and assistants from local bar associations and agencies. The assistant attorney will maintain oversight of the ongoing presentation of the divorce workshop series, but she plans to move on to develop other types of best-practices workshops.

### **Assistance With Forms**

Staff of the Self-Help Management Project also worked with the court to develop a checklist that all courts can use to give reasons for rejecting forms submitted in dissolution actions. This checklist was reviewed by lead clerks and approved as an official form of the Los Angeles court. It has been placed online so that it is available to the public and the bar.<sup>50</sup> The supervising judge of the Family Law Department also held a

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<sup>50</sup> Los Angeles County Superior Court, *Manual of Procedure for Processing Default and Uncontested Judgments Pursuant to Family Code Section 2336*, <http://www.lasuperiorcourt.org/familylaw/pdfs/judgmentmanual.pdf> (accessed November 18, 2004).

meeting of more than 400 attorneys and self-help providers to review the new form because a review of case files showed that private attorneys often had their filings rejected as well. In addition, the managing attorney is working with clerks to revise the rejection form into a checklist that can be used to ensure that self-represented litigants have done everything necessary for the clerk to approve their filings.

A related goal of the management project has been to create uniform packets, forms, and procedures for use across the county. The management project has put together a judgment packet that contains all appropriate Judicial Council forms, along with instructions and simplified worksheets to use as attachments. Management project staff asked court-based self-help center staff and family law clerks to review the packet and provide feedback. This strategy has been extremely successful: The clerks have endorsed the packet, and self-help centers are confident and motivated to use it.

Putting together such packets is a major step for the court. Previously, when litigants requested forms, clerks in many locations have simply given them the list of 580 Judicial Council forms in alphabetical order and asked them to identify which ones they need.

The managing attorney facilitates the distribution of forms and materials to assist self-represented litigants. One self-help center created a new form to help self-represented litigants with declarations. The managing attorney suggested sharing this form with others, including the family law administrator, to create a form that has buy-in from multiple parties and that could be used at multiple self-help centers and courts. The management project has also worked on packets and handouts for spousal support, proof of service by publication, and orders to show cause in family law cases.

### **Support to New Self-Help Centers**

According to site visit respondents and monthly activity logs, the management project provides support to new court-based self-help centers in several ways. First, the managing attorney has provided help with securing concrete items, such as office space, materials, and Internet access. In addition, throughout the implementation of the management project, the managing attorney has helped connect new centers with those that are established so that new staff can learn from experienced workers. The managing attorney arranges for the staff of new centers to spend time shadowing staff at the established centers, and she facilitates the sharing of materials and packets so that new centers do not have to reinvent the wheel. This facilitation role, both for concrete items and for information sharing, is described by respondents as one of the most important accomplishments of the management project.

The management project also has played an integral role in getting I-CAN! stations established at courthouses in Los Angeles County. I-CAN! is a software program that helps self-represented litigants complete their paperwork for cases involving domestic violence, small claims, landlord/tenant issues, governmental child support, and some family law matters. The questions are simple, and they are read aloud on the video component so that people with limited reading and computer skills can make good use of

the program. All modules are available in English and Spanish, and some are also available in Vietnamese. Placing I-CAN! stations in courthouses without self-help centers allows additional litigants to access some form of self-help assistance. The management project worked closely with the Legal Aid Society of Orange County to customize this software for use in Los Angeles County. This involved extensive legal review of the modules for accuracy of law and procedures within Los Angeles. Management project staff members worked with the Long Beach courthouse and information technology staff to facilitate the placement of I-CAN! terminals in the law library and to troubleshoot as problems arose. The management project also provided training on the software for law library staff, clerks, and bench officers. The project's collaboration with Legal Aid Society of Orange County, begun in May 2003, is ongoing.

In an evaluation of the Long Beach program,<sup>51</sup> litigants who used the center were generally pleased with the services. About 85 percent said they got all the information they needed to pursue their case. Although 44 out of 50 respondents noted that they needed someone to personally help them, the law librarian can provide only limited support. In addition, the law library's staff and hours are being reduced 50 percent. As a result, the managing attorney is working to establish an alternative self-help center in the Long Beach courthouse outside of the law library. The I-CAN! computers will be moved to this new location, other terminals will be added, and the center will have full-time staff and sufficient technical support to keep the computers functioning during all court working hours.

The Self-Help Management Project is also helping to develop a new self-help center in the Compton courthouse to be staffed by the Legal Aid Society of Orange County's Community Legal Services office (CLS). The project is using the relationships built with other service providers to provide training and materials for the new staff. The court's Information Services division provided nine computers, which were reconfigured for self-help use under the supervision of the CLS staff. The opening portal page for those computers has links to I-CAN!, the California Courts Self-help Center Web site, and the Los Angeles Superior Court site, with room for future links to other document assembly programs. The management project's ability to gain collaboration from the court and community agencies has provided tremendous resources without cost to CLS, allowing the latter to stretch grant resources to fund more staff hours. As a result of monitoring the Long Beach I-CAN! pilot project, the management project encouraged CLS to develop a model that will supplement I-CAN! computer stations with legal aid staff and trained interns to provide the personal assistance desired by Long Beach program users and to determine best practices for effective use of the self-help computer programs.

One of the collaborative efforts that the project is working on is a way to manage family law cases involving self-represented litigants. Two highly innovative judicial officers at the Antelope Valley court, working with NLS, the family law facilitator, and family court

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<sup>51</sup> K. Lane, Institute for Court Management, *Is the Long Beach Self-Help Center Meeting the Family Law Needs of the Court?* (May 2004).

services, have created a special *pro per* day each Monday at the court. On that day, court files are reviewed prior to hearings to determine what help litigants may need, and self-help center staff assist litigants with paperwork and procedural problems. This pilot project is designed to improve the court's response to self-represented litigants by coordinating needed resources at one time, by streamlining calendars by having litigants with and with attorneys appear on different days and by analyzing what services self-represented litigants need to successfully complete their cases.<sup>52</sup>

### **Resource Development**

As documented on the monthly activity logs and through site visit interviews, the managing attorney has been involved with several grant-writing endeavors aimed at providing funds to self-help centers and other services for self-represented litigants. One example is an AmeriCorps-funded project called JusticeCorps that will provide 100 paid internships for 10 court-based self-help projects (two Family Law Information Centers, the small claims advisor program, and self-help legal access centers). Each of the interns, recruited from three California State universities and UCLA, will provide 300 hours of service at the self-help projects. This grant directly addresses the telephone respondents' request for help with staff and volunteer recruitment. The managing attorney worked with AOC staff to write this grant proposal.

The managing attorney will supervise this project and the three staff people directly responsible for administering the JusticeCorps program.<sup>53</sup> She coordinated the initial two-day training of 100 volunteers, using staff from the AOC, small claims advisor program, and legal services agencies; the assistant attorney provided training in substantive law. The managing attorney coordinated the initial swearing-in ceremony for JusticeCorps members at which Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court Ming Chin, Los Angeles Superior Court Presiding Judge Dukes, and California Administrative Director of the Courts William Vickrey welcomed the new volunteers.

Another grant the managing attorney worked on was an AOC grant for development and implementation of a community-focused action plan for serving self-represented litigants. This implementation grant allows the director of the Family Law Information Center to work two days per month with the managing attorney to develop workshops and other collaborative activities with self-help providers.

The managing attorney also worked with each of the legal services programs applying for Equal Access Partnership Grant funds to obtain the required letter of support from the presiding judge for the application. She also worked with the programs to try to identify and avoid collaboration challenges with the court and to develop proposals to meet needs identified by court staff and judges. She coordinated a meeting of various court staff,

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<sup>52</sup> "New Program to Help Lighten Legal Paperwork," *Antelope Valley Press* (Oct. 2, 2004).

<sup>53</sup> For more information on the JusticeCorps program, see <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/justicecorps/>.

self-help providers, and county counsel to develop terms for a boilerplate agreement for agencies providing legal services in the court to address concerns regarding space usage.

According to site visit respondents, in addition to grant writing, the management project's activities promote the leveraging of scarce resources. Encouraging agencies to share information and materials reduces the time spent re-creating materials available elsewhere.

### Budget and Expenditures

In the first year, 67 percent of the Self-Help Management Project's expenditures were for personnel. This increased to 80 percent in the second year, once both staff members had been hired. In the first year, 33 percent of expenses were for I-CAN! and other costs associated with the start of the Long Beach self-help center. In the second year, 16 percent of the costs again went to costs of self-help center programs, including I-CAN!, and furniture for the centers. About 3 percent of the costs in the second year were for conference and travel, and 1 percent went to materials for workshops. By the third year, 92 percent of the expenditures were for personnel, with 5 percent for supplies and materials and 1 percent each for conference and travel, equipment and furniture, and printing and copying.

### Impact on Providers

Respondents indicated that the management project has resulted in more efficient self-help programs. Self-help center staff members have a one-stop resource to help them with multiple needs, including provision of workshops, forms packets, volunteers, I-CAN! technology, and startup assistance. In addition, respondents explain that self-help centers now provide more consistent information, and the quality of services is more consistent.

Respondents also discussed impacts the management project has had on the level of communication and collaboration among providers. At the first site visit, respondents expressed hope that the management project would create systems allowing various services to share information and best practices and would build the relationships and linkages that make joint projects a possibility. At the second site visit, respondents said that these changes had taken place; the management project had fostered linkages and built trust between providers.

By assisting self-help centers to gain critical resources and employ them as efficiently as possible, the management project helps to maximize the reach of the court-based self-help programs. The managing attorney was instrumental in obtaining an AmeriCorps grant of \$250,000 per year for the next three years, which has been matched with \$125,000 from the AOC, for 100 paid internships per year. Each of these JusticeCorps volunteers will provide 300 hours of volunteer service to self-help centers: a total of 30,000 additional hours of service. These volunteers have been trained in finishing divorces using the workshop methodology developed by the Self-Help Management

Project in conjunction with the self-help centers; this will foster a consistent, efficient system for helping litigants complete their cases. The JusticeCorps program has been the impetus for increased attention to self-represented litigants from other parts of the court, allowing for expansion of computer-based resources and other support for the management project.

By working with the courts to encourage Internet and forms assistance—and now supporting that with JusticeCorps volunteers who have facility and comfort in using computers—the program allows many more people to complete necessary court papers with less need for staff resources. As the Self-Help Management Project works with the new Compton self-help center, which is providing a combination of services based on helping people use computers, this change in the way of providing services can be implemented in a thoughtful and coordinated manner.

### Impact on Litigants

The Los Angeles model is not a direct service model, and therefore, the management project was not expected to have a direct impact on self-represented litigants at this point. However, over the long term, the impact of the project on self-help providers should, in turn, lead to impacts on the judicial process for self-represented litigants. Respondents explained that they anticipate a more litigant-friendly process and, ultimately, a fairer application of justice for self-represented litigants. Better prepared litigants, in turn, can ease the workload for court staff and judges. One respondent stated that improved quality and consistency of services among providers and the resultant improvements in the court system would increase the legitimacy of self-help services and improve the reputation of self-represented litigants.

#### *Vignette: Assistance from a JusticeCorps Volunteer*

One of the college students participating in the JusticeCorps project is a political science considering continuing on to law school after graduation. She is interested in helping people and learning about the court at the same time. She works under attorney supervision at a district court self-help center. While working at the center, a monolingual Spanish-speaking woman came in for help with legal papers she had received, as her husband had filed for dissolution and wanted to take custody of their children. Her husband claimed that she was spending too much time at her job and neglecting the children. The student verbally translated the papers into Spanish and read them to this woman. She then provided the proper responsive forms to complete, and translated the declaration from Spanish into English so that the judge could understand this woman's side of the situation.

## **Impact on Court Process**

The management project's staff have focused attention on linking court personnel and court-based services with self-help providers in Los Angeles County. As a result of these efforts, the managing attorney can take questions or concerns from providers to the court and can share with providers information and decisions made by the court. In addition, the management project's emphasis on developing model workshops impacts the court. The goal for litigants who participate in these workshops is that they will be better prepared for court, resulting in a more efficient and streamlined court process.

### *Vignette: Divorce Workshop Participant*

Carrie, a mother of three, came to a workshop for help ending her 15-year marriage. Her husband had escalating drug and alcohol problems and frequently slapped and threatened Carrie in front of the children. Two years ago, when Carrie told her husband that she wanted to get a divorce, he moved out of the family home and into a small trailer on the property. Since then, he has slept in the trailer but enters the family home whenever he pleases and repeatedly tells Carrie that he would never give her a divorce and that he would kill her first. After moving into the trailer he intentionally quit his job and stopped providing any financial support the family. Over the past year, Carrie has been trying to get help to get a divorce. She tried non-profit legal agencies but was always told that she earned a little too much money to qualify for services. Finally, she came to the divorce workshop offered at her neighborhood courthouse.

On the same day Carrie prepared and filed her divorce case and, in collaboration with the court-based domestic violence clinic, filed and obtained emergency temporary restraining orders. At the next two workshops, she completed all of the required court forms to complete her case. Carrie made one last trip to the workshop to finalize her proposed judgment based on the court's orders at the default hearing, and to express her gratitude to the court's self-help system for helping her take back her life.

## **Key Findings and Lessons Learned**

### **Accomplishment of Goals**

The Los Angeles Self-Help Management Project is successfully implementing the urban collaboration model. The project has developed partnerships between the court and legal service organizations; has assisted with the development of new self-help centers; has worked toward securing additional funding sources for self-help services; and has developed tools for the self-help centers, including workshops, standardized forms, packets, and procedures.

The purpose of this project was to encourage the coordination and expansion of resources for existing and new projects. The management project has assisted new projects in

securing space, materials, and Internet resources. It has also connected staff of the new centers with those of existing centers so that they can share resources and learn from experienced providers. Management project staff have worked with existing programs to help them redesign some delivery systems to allow for more efficient delivery of services and reduced burnout. Project staff were instrumental in obtaining a \$250,000 per year grant from AmeriCorps to provide 100 paid internships for 10 court-based self-help projects and the county's small claims advisor.

Management project activities have resulted in more efficient self-help programs. Self-help center staff members have a one-stop resource to help them with multiple needs, resulting in more efficient and seamless service delivery. The management project has fostered linkages and has built trust between providers.

The Self-Help Management Project has delivered valuable tools to the Los Angeles self-help centers; developing them separately would have been a strain on the resources of any individual center. In the first two years of operation, the management project has provided a family dissolution workshop curriculum and workshops, forms packets, a revision of the I-CAN! software, start-up assistance to new centers, and information and referral tools. Once the Self-Help Management Project was in place, the staff were able to provide unexpected benefits including a program to supervise the JusticeCorps volunteers countywide.

The management project has played a role in the education and encouragement of court staff and leaders to appreciate the benefits of supporting self-help programs and in collaborating with community legal service providers. This has been most effective following an administrative change that placed the management project under the supervision of the Family Law Administrator, which links the project more closely linked to core operations than when it was supervised by the Strategic Planning Unit.

### **Service Issues**

**Staff chosen to implement the project are critical.** Respondents explained that the managing attorney must be skilled at navigating in the political arena and dealing with people and agencies with conflicting agendas. Furthermore, site visit respondents explained that the managing attorney must be able to gain the respect of others within and outside the court for her or his legal expertise, so being an attorney is an advantage. Both of the management project's staff members are seen as a reliable resource for family law questions.

**Selecting an appropriate starting point facilitated the program's development.** Given the number, geographic spread, and diversity of agencies providing self-help services in Los Angeles County, it was necessary for the Self-Help Management Project to find a focus for its efforts. That focus has been court-based services (in addition to several large, independent self-help nonprofits). Focusing on court-based services was logical for several reasons. First, self-help providers list increasing coordination and

communication between court-based self-help centers and other court entities as an important goal. Second, the management project is located within the central court, thus providing a natural link between court-based self-help centers and court personnel and agencies. Third, at the time the management project began, there was momentum in the Los Angeles County courts for court-based self-help centers: Several new court-based self-help centers had been established, and others were planned. Supporting newly established centers, as well as aiding in the establishment of additional centers, was a natural direction for the management project.

**Program staff acted strategically in order to create an attitude change among providers.** According to respondents, some of the most important and intangible work that the management project has done is to change attitudes among self-help providers and court-based services. Agencies are now sharing information with each other and are eager to learn from each other. The management project's approach has been a combination of respect and humility. For example, the managing attorney is sure to tell providers when she thinks that their materials or procedures are top quality, then will ask whether she can share those materials with others so that other agencies can benefit from their expertise. Similarly, when management project staff want to institute a change, they first approach key constituent groups (such as NLS or LAFLA) to present ideas and get feedback; management project staff do not assume they have all the correct answers and instead are careful to solicit information from others. As a result of this combination of respect and humility, self-help centers and court-based services are eager to collaborate with the management project and, by extension, with each other. Agencies appreciate the opportunity to participate meaningfully in plans to change or modify their service delivery.