

# How to Design and Establish a **Technology Based Self-Help Legal Center**

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### **Volunteers, Partnerships and Technology**



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## Preliminary Note

This manual has been prepared for the first of what is hoped to be a series of training conferences on Technology Based Self Help Centers for access to justice, sometimes also referred to as Self Help Offices.

It is very much a preliminary product, drawing heavily on the experiences of the initial such Centers. We look forward to your suggestions, additions and ideas to this manual.

This manual is drafted from the perspective of creating a new center. A number of the tasks enumerated will not need to be addressed by an existing self-help center. The key issue for those centers will be how to adapt their program to effectively use technology.

The manual uses the terms client, customer and consumer are used interchangeably in this text. One of the principles of a SHO is that an attorney-client relationship is not established, however, many social services organizations refer to the persons they serve as clients, and some of the resources have been adapted by programs which establish an attorney-client relationship.

This draft will be made available at the conference website <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/calendar/conferences/communityaccessstojustice.htm> and on [www.selfhelpsupport.org](http://www.selfhelpsupport.org), the national on-line resource center for court based pro se/pro per and self-help access to justice programs.

# **I. Introduction**

## **A. Why Technology Based Self Help Centers**

In the past 7 years, courts and legal services have worked together to develop programs to assist the growing number of litigants who are forced to represent themselves in court. Extraordinary programs have been created that provide attorney assistance to help hundreds of thousands of people each year complete legal documents and gain access to the court system. Partnerships to expand representation using pro bono, limited scope representation and expanded funding for legal services have increased the number of litigants who are represented by attorneys. Remarkable technological resources have been developed to help litigants find information, complete forms, learn about resources in their community and represent themselves in court.

However, there are far too many low-income litigants whose legal needs go unmet. The most recent report of California's Commission on Access to Justice indicates that we are only meeting the legal needs of 28% of low-income Californians.<sup>1</sup> Needs assessments from other states indicate similar levels of need.<sup>2</sup> We need to learn from these innovations and refine them to make our services more effective. We need to expand our existing partnerships to reach out to more people in the community. We need to learn how to use technology more effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> The Path to Equal Justice, A Five-Year Status Report on Access to Justice in California, California Commission on Access to Justice, October 2002 <http://www.calbar.ca.gov>.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Washington State Legal Needs Study (2003) at <http://www.courts.wa.gov/newsinfo/CivilLegalNeeds%20093003.pdf>

Experiments have shown that using a combination of technology, volunteers and partnerships to provide low-income people with information and tools that they can use themselves can result in greater access to justice at lower costs, as well as smoother and fairer court functioning. These experiments provide low-income people the opportunity to get preventative assistance and to find resources in their community for additional assistance.

The Technology Based Self Help Center is a critical innovation designed to leverage the power of technology, volunteerism, and neighborhood offices in support of access to justice. This concept can bring access to millions.

## **B. What is a Technology Based Self-help Center (TBSHC)?**

The core idea is simple. A TBSHC is a physical location where the public can obtain legal information, generate legal documents, and receive referrals to help them make decisions and resolve legal problems. Generally, an attorney-client relationship is not established at the Centers. TBSHCs use a variety of internet resources to deliver these services. Staff or volunteers at the TBSHCs assist the consumer to navigate the internet often through the use of a specially designed web site or portal to obtain what they need. These TBSHCs can be located in courts, community agencies, and/or legal services programs. TBSHCs are normally free, but may restrict their services to lower income consumers or particular populations.

## **C. Examples of TBSHCs.**

There are already a wide variety of TBSHC's in action. Some examples follow.

- **At a Court:** A court devotes space to a TBSHC which is supervised by an attorney who helps the public generate the legal pleadings they need to represent themselves in court. The public can also receive information on how to file the documents and represent themselves at a court hearing. These TBSHCs often provide referrals to community services as well as to free, reduced fee, or full fee attorneys and other sources of legal help. The services of a court based TBSHC are available to all parties in a case. (An example of a court based TBSHC is in Section VIII.)
- **Legal Services Program at a Community Organization:** A legal services TBSHC can be located in a community agency and provide a wide range of legal information, prepare legal documents and pleadings, assist in writing letters to resolve common legal problems, determine eligibility for public benefits, and make referrals to other legal and social services. Consumers can often call a legal advice line from the TBSHCs to obtain legal advice and other brief services. Such programs are less governed by requirements of court-type neutrality, but must pay careful attention to whether they are creating attorney-client relationships, and the obligations that such relationships would bring. (A detailed example in Washington DC is in Section VIII.)
- **Run Directly by the Community Organization:** A community agency can provide consumers with access to a wide range of legal information and documents and refer them to other sources of help. The agencies can provide holistic services beyond legal by also providing access to health, financial,

and housing information. (An example in the state of Virginia is described in Section VIII)

- **Using Technology Without a Physical Location:** One extension of this idea is to use technology so that individuals can access these services directly over the Internet, without need for a physical location. Support can be provided over the phone. (An example of a court program is the Alaska Court System's Family Law Self-Help Center [www.state.ak.us/courts/selfhelp.htm](http://www.state.ak.us/courts/selfhelp.htm). An example of a legal services program is the Pine Tree Legal Assistance Center multi-lingual website and intake hotline in Maine <http://www.ptla.org/index.html>.)

### **C. Basic Principles of TBSHCs**

While there is substantial variety among TBSHC's, the three core principles are the same, designed to maximize the power of technology and the use of volunteers, while minimizing limitations on access that might come from traditional legal constraints.

#### **1. The information is embedded on the Web, not in individual service providers.**

The key principle of the TBSHCs is that the expert information and legal documents are available from the website, so that the staff and volunteers at the centers do not need to be experts, but only need to be able to help the client navigate the website to find what the client needs. Sophisticated document generators require the users only to answer a series of questions in order to generate a legal document or court pleading in the correct format.

This principle means that TBSHCs can be located in facilities where staff are not legal experts and that non-attorney volunteers can be used as navigators, who help with finding and using the right online tools. This is particularly helpful as non-attorney volunteers are a largely untapped resource. TBSHC legal services must be reviewed by a legal expert, but that expert can be available by telephone and e-mail from a remote location.

As TBSHCs mature, an important feature will be the ability of their websites to link to “the best of the web.” Every day better and more elaborate content and decision making tools become available on the web. These will enhance the range and depth of services that can be delivered at the TBSHCs. It will also allow the TBSHCs to deliver more holistic services, addressing all aspects of a client’s problem.

**2. The TBSHC does not provide legal advice.**

No legal advice should be provided at the Center. Legal information can be printed from the website and read or explained to the client. If the client needs legal advice, the client should be referred to a legal services program or connected to a legal hotline. Ideally calls from the TBSHC should receive priority over other hotline calls.

**3. There is no ongoing obligation after the visit itself.**

The third principle is that once the customer leaves the TBSHC, the Center has no further obligations to the customer, and the customer is so notified at the beginning of the visit. This preserves the self-help nature of the service and insures that the TBSHC does not develop a caseload of open cases which need to be monitored. Instead, the customer is urged to return as often as necessary to resolve their matter.

## **II. First Issues in Establishing a TBSHC**

### **A. Partnership Building**

Good partnerships can be key to operating a cost-efficient, well run TBSHC. TBSHCs that are operated by the courts can be very effective models. Many litigants go directly to courts to obtain assistance with their legal problems and problems can be addressed immediately. However these TBSHCs have to be neutral because the court is the ultimate decision maker in the dispute. This limits what the TBSHC can provide to the consumer. If a legal services agency operates the TBSHC, it may be able to have more flexibility in choosing what clients to target or what services to offer, but it still must not cross the line into legal representation. If a TBSHC operated by a court or legal services program partners with a community service agency, this agency can serve as a “branch office” of the TBSHC and reach more people. A community agency might be willing to provide space and staff and help the consumer navigate the TBSHC website, yet the supervising agency still has to provide oversight of the “branch TBSHC,” at least remotely.

A new movement that is just budding in the non-profit community service world is the concept of navigation. More community agencies are expanding their services by helping their clients navigate self-help websites that address health, housing, law and a number of other issue areas. As this movement expands, partnerships with community agencies will become easier and provide a cost effective way to expand a TBSHC’s reach.

For example, in Virginia, a wide range of agencies serve as navigation sites for seniors in need of legal information; this includes churches, hospitals, health clinics, United Way agencies, libraries, Senior Centers, retirement communities, police stations, etc. (See [www.seniornavigator.com](http://www.seniornavigator.com))

These community agency partners will need to be able to link to the TBSHC website, receive training for their staff and volunteers, and have someone to call for technical assistance. Materials describing how to navigate the site and locate information on different legal topics will be very helpful to them. A memorandum of understanding should be created that sets out each organization's roles. This agreement does not necessarily need to be signed and should not be legally binding, but does help to ensure a meeting of the minds. At the beginning of the partnership, the oversight agency will have to provide more training and technical assistance to the partner agency until a level of trust is achieved. Thereafter, the level of effort will be far less.

## **B. Location**

The advantage of partnerships is the opportunity to expand the TBSHC's service locations. However this does not necessarily mean that full responsibility for the TBSHC is delegated to the partner site. In some cases the partner may be entirely passive providing only space, publicity and access. Staffing and responsibility for delivering the services remains with the TBSHC's host entity. An example of this arrangement is partnering with a church. In other cases, the partner agency will provide staff and/or volunteers but quality control and operational oversight remains with the host. An

example is a partnership with a social service agency where a broad array of services is provided at the partner's site.

Finally, some partners will assume full responsibility for the site except for training and technical assistance. However, in these cases, services may be limited to helping the consumer use the computer equipment; the agency may not provide direction in selecting or using the content. An example of this arrangement is partnering with a library.

Partnerships to expand TBSHC locations can meet a variety of objectives. One is to expand the services of the TBSHC to certain racial and ethnic groups. Partnerships with agencies that serve these groups can achieve this goal. This is particularly valuable in immigrant and other communities where members may be nervous about interaction with court or other official bodies, or may not identify their problem as a legal issue. It can help TBSHCs reach people facing certain difficult problems. Examples are partnerships with agencies that serve victims of abuse, AIDS, homelessness, etc. The ultimate goal is to reach people who do not have easy access to the justice systems or to legal representation.

### **C. Service Definition and Establishment**

Within the core concepts described above, TBSHCs can provide a wide variety of services, many of which are described later. In short, however, each TBSHC needs to determine early on what services it will provide to its consumers. Will the TBSHC offer information to consumers regarding basic legal rights? Will consumers find and use tools

that help them enforce their rights? Will consumers complete a diagnostic process that indicates whether they need a referral to a more comprehensive service provider? Will these services be limited to, or focused on, particular groups of those in legal need, consistent with governing law?

The answers to these questions will depend in large part on the availability of pre-existing resources that can be located and integrated into the TBSHC's package. If, for example, a statewide website already includes much of the legal information needed, in one or more languages, that provides a strong tool to provide the core informational service. Similarly, if a document generation package has been deployed in the state, that resource allows deployment of a whole set of access capacities. If, on the other hand, the resources are not deployed, then the TBSHC will be much more limited, and will depend on the resources that the TBSHC can pull together for itself. The core early task is identifying the technology tools that are available, and, if necessary, loading them into a central web tool. A general website tool for this purpose has been developed by Pro Bono Net and is now available for TBSHCs as described below in Section VI.

### **III. How a TBSHC Works Day to Day**

#### **A. Promoting a TBSHC**

A new TBSHC is promoted in the same manner as any new community service. Door-to-door flyers, posters in public places, materials left at stores and community agencies for distribution, articles and ads in community newsletters and newspapers, and mailings are common methods that can be successfully deployed. (Examples are provided in the Resource Section at the end of this Manual.) Often volunteers from the

community can be used to distribute publicity and make presentations at community gatherings. There is one caveat: The publicity should not mention that the key service component is technology-based as many low-income and older persons may then avoid coming to a TBSHC for fear that there is an expectation that they can use a computer.

## **B. Intake**

There are pros and cons for each of the intake options: walk in or appointments. Offering a walk-in service is very customer friendly. However too many customers can overwhelm the TBSHC's service capacity. Too few customers prevent the efficient use of TBSHC's staff. One TBSHC in the District of Columbia switched from a walk-in to an appointment method so that staff could schedule time for community presentations to increase the use of the TBSHCs. An appointment system allows staff and volunteers to plan their time better but makes the services less accessible. Also in an appointment system, no-shows may cause the underutilization of services. Appointments are particularly important when services are offered in a workshop setting. This allows many customers to be assisted at one time and establishes an initial support system for workshop participants. A mixed system is possible where most customers are scheduled, but walk-ins are allowed commensurate with capacity. The choice made may depend on the institutional affiliation of the TBSHC, its location, and its community.

## **C. Handling Emergencies**

TBSHCs should maintain a list of referrals for customers with a variety of common emergencies that are beyond the scope of the Center's services.

## **D. Screening**

If eligibility requirements (usually established by the broader operating agency such as a legal services program) govern the use of the TBSHCs, staff or volunteers must first screen for eligibility. If customers call before coming to the Center, they should be screened for eligibility at that time to save a needless trip. Since the services provided by the Center are self-help in nature, conflict checks are usually not required. For the Model ABA rules, *not necessarily in force in your state*, see the Appendix.

## **E. Basic Staff**

TBSHC staff need customer service skills and comfort with navigating a website. However, since staff do not require much substantive expertise across different topics, TBSHCs can be operated by existing staff as a supplement to their current duties. For example a social worker can help a customer complete an online public benefit check-up to determine their eligibility for government funded services. A domestic violence shelter volunteer can assist in completing a restraining order form. Similarly, existing legal services staff can be reassigned to a TBSHC. Non-attorney volunteers who are familiar with computers are ideal candidates for staffing TBSHCs. Volunteers enjoy the customer contact and do not have to be substantive experts. This may be an excellent internship for a student. Computer savvy, retired people also make ideal volunteers as they often will continue a volunteer experience they enjoy for many years. Retired volunteers need flexibility to take vacations and other prolonged periods of leave. However since TBSHCs don't generate ongoing caseloads, this volunteer position is ideal for retired volunteers.

## **F. Quality Control**

Quality control begins with training for the staff and volunteers in TBSHC. The training covers intake, eligibility and other office procedures. It also covers an overview of the substantive information, document generation and other tools available on the website. Finally there should be considerable practice in navigating the site and responding to common consumer needs. After the training, new staff and volunteers can observe experienced counterparts before they begin serving clients. Then the roles can be switched where new staff/volunteers provide the services and experienced staff/volunteers provide feedback. Materials can be prepared which provide a detailed index to the website to supplement the online index and search engine. A guide explaining how to navigate all sections of the website should also be prepared for training and as a reference at the center.

The other key component of quality control is the ongoing supervision of staff and volunteers at the TBSHC. To reduce costs, this supervision can be provided from a remote location. In this way, one supervisor can oversee several TBSHCs at once. This assumes that the daily volume of clients at one center is less than 20. If the centers handle markedly larger volumes of clients, supervisors will not be able to monitor as many centers and very busy centers may require onsite supervision. Programs will have to experiment to determine the ideal match of supervisors and centers.

At the beginning, a supervisor should review every client service before the client leaves the center. After the client is interviewed by the staff or volunteers at the center, the supervisor should be contacted to review the facts of the matter. If the supervisor believes that legal advice, brief services, or extended representation is required, the client

should be referred to the appropriate resource. Ideally clients in need of advice or brief services can contact a legal hotline from the center, so that the center staff/volunteers can help the client understand the advice and provide relevant follow-up information from the website. If the client only needs information, a document, a referral, or simple advice that can be provided by the supervisor, the services are provided at the center. As the staff/volunteers at the center become more experienced, the supervisor may only have to review the less routine matters.

Similarly, at the beginning, the supervisor should review every document that is generated at the center. The document can be emailed to the supervisor who can modify it and email it back for signature. Again, as center staff/volunteer become more experienced, some routine documents will not need to be reviewed, such as consumer complaint letters.

A final quality control measure is a policy that once the consumer leaves the center, the center has no further responsibilities for the consumer's matter. The consumer should sign a notice of this fact to ensure that she or he is properly informed. This rule will ensure that open case files are not maintained which otherwise would require careful monitoring.

## **G. Controlling Volume**

Ideally a TBSHC should allow people to walk in without an appointment. However, if the volume of traffic becomes unmanageable, an appointment or other scheduling system will have to be used. To accommodate walk-ins, you can reserve an hour or so during the day for walk-ins. If someone arrives before this time, they can be advised to return during the "walk-in period" and given a pass to present when they

return. Once the passes are all given out, walk-ins have to be advised to schedule an appointment or return the next day for a pass.

## **H. Evaluation**

The best way to evaluate a program is to determine, at the outset, what the program is expected to achieve. Important factors might be:

- Cost per case
- Number of cases closed per staff assigned to the project
- Quality of service

There should also be some expectations concerning outcomes. This could be the percentage of people who pursue their matter to conclusion (e.g. divorce decree) or the number of people with positive outcomes.

Customer satisfaction is also a useful consideration. Once the objectives have been established for the project, the information that must be collected to evaluate the program will be evident. Thus program evaluation becomes a simple matter of comparing the results with the expectations. If the expectations are not met, the design of the TBSHC may have to be modified. Sometimes the problem is unrealistic expectations.

One form of evaluation that is essential to the operation of a TBSHC is tracking customers to determine the outcome of their self-help efforts. At the beginning, all customers should be tracked. Without knowing the outcomes, one can never be sure the project is performing well. It would be like operating an automobile assembly line without ever test driving the finished product. It is better to limit the number of customers served at the beginning than to abandon outcome assessment. For example

when a similar Hawaii project began assessing outcomes, it found that only 20% of the customers pursued their matter to resolution. After making program adjustments, 80% of their customers achieved a resolution.

After the project is operating effectively, the outcome assessment can be done on a sample basis, but should not be discontinued. A continuing assessment of outcomes is critical to developing new resources and providing appropriate training. Additionally it is important to know if the project is serving a targeted population or a proportionate share of the population by gender, race, ethnicity and geographical location.

Volunteer evaluation is a reciprocal process. One should offer the volunteers a chance to evaluate the program from their perspective. One should also provide some form of feedback to the volunteers to help them improve their performance. Volunteer assessments of the program can be obtained through (1) written surveys (which can be completed anonymously if necessary), (2) meetings with the volunteers to elicit possible areas of improvement or (3) one-on-one consultations with the volunteers. It is also a good idea to hold “exit” interviews with the volunteers who leave the program, to identify possible areas of improvement.

Feedback to volunteers can be provided in many ways such as one-on-one consultations provided they are conducted in a positive manner (e.g. “I have a suggestion that you may find useful”). Meetings can be held with groups of volunteers where suggestions for improvements are made without identifying the volunteer at issue. If some of the volunteers don’t improve, one may want to set mutually acceptable improvement goals (e.g. 90% of documents prepared without error.) If coaching and

additional training don't work, one may have to change the volunteer's responsibilities (i.e. greeting clients when they arrive at the TBSHC) or "fire" the volunteer.

One may want to use a more formal evaluation process, but be sure to explain it to the volunteer at the time of their initial training. This evaluation might be a short one-on-one conversation at the end of the first month or two and thereafter quarterly. However do not wait to raise an important issue until the scheduled times. Don't surprise a volunteer at these evaluation sessions.

## **IV. Delivering Services**

### **A. Defining the Relationship**

To maintain the self-help nature of the center, no attorney-client relationship should be created. Consumers should be notified of this fact both in writing (by a notice) and orally. They should be told that any personal information they provide is not protected the same way it is as if told to an attorney. However, the consumer should be assured that it is the policy of the program not to divulge the information they provide to others.

If the program is operating from a court, then the person should be told that the service is available to all parties in the case, and that opponents may be provided similar information.

If the client calls a legal hotline from the center, or a referral to an unbundled or other service is made, an attorney-client relationship may be created with the hotline or other attorney. Clarity is particularly important when the TBSHC is run by a legal aid program, which is then performing intake into its representation units.

As a general matter, the consumer should be required to sign an acknowledgement that an attorney-client relationship has not been established by the TBSHC and what this means. Models of such documents are attached in the Appendix.

## **B. Establishing Core Services**

Here is the range of services that can be provided at a TBSHC, and how those might be established:

- **A broad selection of legal information, including answers to commonly asked legal questions and a wide variety of legal self-help brochures.**

Almost every state's network of legal services programs is now developing a public website with extensive legal information for consumers. All the active state sites can now be found at [www.lawhelp.org](http://www.lawhelp.org).<sup>3</sup> In each state, the Legal Services Corporation grantees are working with a broad network of court, bar and law school stakeholders to integrate information. TBSHC planners are strongly urged to link into this process and to take advantage of, and add to, that resource.

This information should be on, or linked by, these existing statewide websites. If it is not, it is often already gathered by local bar associations, by courts, or by legal clinics operated by legal aid or law schools. Sometimes the materials have been developed at the state level or a local level, but can easily be customized. The subjects needed to be covered will vary with the focus and location of the TBSHC.

- **A collection of interactive model complaint letters**

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<sup>3</sup> If the state site is not yet active, the name of the program with funded responsibility in any particular state can be obtained from the Legal Services Corporation.

These letters are created by document generation software. They should address common complaints that clients have with businesses (e.g., unreturned security deposit). The internet has a database of addresses of the complaint departments of most major businesses worldwide. Each letter should include the names and addresses of the relevant regulatory agencies in the body of the letter, to which copies will be sent. The document is generated by entering the consumer's answers to questions asked by the software. Such software can be obtained from a variety of sources, including private vendors such as RapidDocs, and through a Legal Services Corporation initiative in which LSC is assisting each state to achieve document generating capacity.<sup>4</sup>

AARP has found that well written letters sent to the correct addresses with copies sent to appropriate regulatory agencies listed in the body of the letters have over an 80% success rate.

- **A public benefits check-up program.**

By answering the software's questions, the program indicates all federal and local benefits a consumer may be eligible for. It also provides the location of the nearest benefits office, instructions on how to get to the office via public transportation, and a list of information/documents that consumers should take with them. See [www.benefitscheckup.org](http://www.benefitscheckup.org) or [www.thebenefitbank.com](http://www.thebenefitbank.com) for models.

- **Assistance with obtaining local government services.**

The website can include templates for requesting most government services (e.g., removal of: dead tree, abandoned car, trash). E-mails can be sent to the proper

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<sup>4</sup> To identify who has the resources in your state, contact Glenn Rawdon at the Legal Services Corporation, [grawdon@lsc.gov](mailto:grawdon@lsc.gov)

government agency. These services can be located through the local government's gateway or by contacting appropriate officials.

- **Assistance with obtaining vital records.**

The Internet provides addresses for most agencies that house vital records. Letters can be generated requesting copies of these documents. Part of the process of setting up the TBSHC is locating the on-line addresses for each of these services and integrating them into the TBSHC site. City, state and federal gateways provide access to these resources.

- **A small claims court complaint form and packet with instructions**

A document generator is used to produce a small claims complaint by answering questions posed by the software. The packet should include how to complete and file the complaint in court, directions to the courthouse, a list of proof (evidence) that should be brought to the small claims hearing for the most common legal problems, and a description of how the hearing will be conducted. (for example see:

<http://www.sanmateocourt.org/director.php?filename=./smallclaims/index.html>

- **A program that generates some simple legal documents**

This works by having consumers answer a series of questions posed by the software (e.g., will, power of attorney). The resources available above can be customized to provide this service. Moreover, in many states, private sector vendors have extensive packages which can be purchased and used.

- **A program that generates court pleadings for most common legal problems**

This also works by having consumers answer a series of questions (e.g., uncontested divorce, name change), and uses the same software. However the legal logic is often more complex, and it is important to make sure that people do not use them unless it is appropriate. The triage functions of current document generation programs are not generally not sophisticated enough to help a litigant determine the correct course of action without additional information. Attorney assessment and document review is generally necessary.

- **Assistance with applying for government benefits.**

Soon, some government agencies will allow clients to complete and file an application for benefits on-line (e.g., SSA, VA).

- **A program that determines if and where a client can purchase their medicines at a discount.**

This can be located at <http://www.benefitscheckuprx.org/>

- **Referrals to other legal aid programs or community services.**

The statewide websites mentioned above have links to legal aid and community services that are appropriate referrals for many civil legal issues. This includes listings of legal aid, community, social service and government agencies. These are indexed by the problem areas they address and by the zip codes of the areas they serve.

- **Information on how to prepare for a court hearing.**

Depending upon the location of the TBSCCH, directions to the courtroom and explanations of how to access the facilities may be very helpful. Short video clips or

power point demonstrations on how to present oneself in court to serve pleadings can be very useful.

## **V. Preparing for a TBSHC**

### **A. Location**

An excellent location for a TBSHC is the courthouse, as this is where unrepresented consumers go when they have a legal problem. TBSHCs in courthouses are usually far busier than counterparts in community agencies and organizations. However, TBSHCs in the community have the advantage of being accessible in both the physical and psychological senses for those who might find the courthouse intimidating or difficult to reach.

TBSHCs located in community agencies should be located in agencies that serve the target audience. In this way TBSHCs can piggyback on the agency's publicity and outreach. The location should be near public transportation and have sufficient security to ensure the safety of the TBSHC staff and volunteers

One proven method for locating a potential TBSHC site is to go to a neighborhood populated by the target audience. Explore agencies near local transportation that might be willing to serve as TBSHCs. Churches can be used if the sponsor of the TBSHC is willing to provide the necessary equipment and supervise the site. Keep in mind however that some consumers may not use a church for services if they are members of a different faith.

One can also consult with community leaders in these neighborhoods to find an agency willing to participate. Mailings to potential agencies tend to be less

successful than a personal visit to the agency. A TBSHC can also be located in an agency that is near another one that serves the target audience. It is also helpful to look to agencies that have the same mission and have other essential items such as a good security system, computer equipment and telephones.

The bureaucracy that must be navigated to establish a TBSHC in a government agency often makes these less desirable candidates. The same may be true of a branch office of a large non-profit.

## **B. Occupancy Agreement**

The agreement to rent or otherwise occupy a space in another agency should include the following provisions:

- Rent
- Who pays for utilities and how much they cost?
- What equipment (computer, printer, fax, telephones, desks, chairs, etc) will be provided by the host agency; who is responsible for repairs?
- Insurance: does it cover the site and, if not, who pays? What additional insurance is needed?
- Security: who provides it and who maintains it?
- Liability: how is it divided between the host and the TBSHC?
- Duration of the occupancy and the advance notice required to request that the space be vacated.
- Whether a waiting room for the consumers will be provided and other items such as meeting space?

- A clear statement of lines of control and authority of each party.

## **C. Staff**

1. **Volunteers:** Some TBSHC use law students or other college students, however their likely tenure with the program will be short. Retired people are a good source of volunteers but they are likely to serve only one or two days per week. Allowances also must be made for extended vacations or other gaps in service, but a content retired volunteer may serve for years and even decades.
2. **Community Agency Staff:** These staff can provide TBSHCs as part of their job responsibilities since legal expertise is not required. However, training is needed, and the TBSHC must be sensitive to not imposing extra burdens on them.
3. **Legal Services Staff:** A legal aid office can place a paralegal in a TBSHC office. The paralegal can split his or her time among several offices if the TBSHCs only operate part time.

## **D. Training**

The staff and volunteers should receive an overview of the most common legal problem areas and information on the use of the internet, special websites and document generating software. There should also be training in interviewing and other interpersonal skills. There should be significant hands-on practice navigating the website

for common consumer issues. Finally there should be training in basic office procedures and lines of supervision. A sample training outline is attached in the Appendix.

### **E. Timeline chart**

The following chart sets out the key activities and sample timelines for establishing a TBSHC in a community agency. Each site will probably involve some variation from this timeline.

<b>TBSHC Timeline</b>	<b>1st Quarter</b>	<b>2nd Quarter</b>	<b>3rd Quarter</b>	<b>4th Quarter</b>	<b>5th Quarter</b>	<b>6th Quarter</b>
Recruit host Agency/secure space	X	X				
Open TBSHC site to community			X			
Hire/train on-site staff		X	X			
Adapt existing TBSHC procedures manual/ training materials	X	X				
Purchase/secure office furniture		X				
Purchase office equipment [computers/fax/copier/telephones/printer]		X				
Purchase computer software		X				
Enter necessary documents into document generator	X	X				
Install telephone/fax/high speed modem line		X				
Adapt website	X	X				
Test all systems prior to opening of TBSHC including computers hardware/software/office equipment /website links/modem/telephone/downloading systems			X			

<b>TBSHC Timeline</b>	<b>1st Quarter</b>	<b>2nd Quarter</b>	<b>3rd Quarter</b>	<b>4th Quarter</b>	<b>5th Quarter</b>	<b>6th Quarter</b>
Develop/implement security procedures, if appropriate [exterior/interior locks, equipment lockdown devices]		X	X			
Develop/produce promotional materials		X				
Purchase office supplies		X				
Promote services to Community			X	X	X	X
Open TBSHC site to the community			X			
Deliver services to Community			X	X	X	X
Evaluate results					X	X
Recruit and train volunteers	X	X				

## **F. Costs of TBSHCs**

The cost of agency based TBSHCs can be very low. Some community agencies may be willing to host a TBSHC at no cost to the sponsor, other than access to the Internet. Some agencies may be able to operate simply with additional funding for new equipment and high speed internet connections. An agency which is not willing to provide staff to serve consumers or supervise volunteers, will require a staff person of the sponsor to serve at the TBSHC or remotely supervise volunteers, who are recruited and trained by the sponsor agency. However part-time staff are sufficient if the TBSHC will only be open a few days a week.

## **G. Office set up**

The space allotted to the TBSHCs generally provides for two or three workstations, one for a staff person, and the others for non-attorney volunteers. A workstation consists of a table, a computer with a modem, a telephone, and two chairs: one for the paralegal/volunteer and the other for the consumer. There is also a printer, fax, and scanner in the office. On the walls, there are brochure racks containing useful legal information for consumers.

## **VI. Technology, Equipment, and Content**

### **A. Information Management Software**

As discussed previously, the key information source of a TBSHC is a central website with an impressive array of information and services. The website should serve as a portal to all of the various resources TBSHC staff need to assist consumers. These resources should include self-help legal publications, document/complaint letter generation, benefit eligibility screeners, legal aid referral information, links to local government agencies, and other relevant resources.

Ideally the TBSHC website technology should have:

- The ability to organize efficiently and effectively the multiple types of resources listed above;
- Easy-to-navigate interface for center staff, including a search tool;
- User-friendly administrative tools that allow the program to add effortlessly new services and information as they become available.

There should also be a process in place in which the TBSHC navigators who use the site can provide direct feedback about what resources should be added, removed, and what other site tools would be helpful to serve consumers;

When planning a website for a TBSHC, **survey the existing online technology** within your community and state. As mentioned earlier, through Legal Services Corporation funding, almost all fifty states now have a legal services statewide website. These sites have spent months cataloging legal referral information and resources, as well as links to other services for low-income populations in their states, and many can serve as the central TBSHC site in their current form. For example, in one state a county bar association partnered with their local courts to open a TBSHC in the courthouse and planned originally to build a website from scratch. However, in consultation with the local legal aid programs they chose to use the state's legal statewide website as the central information source (with minor tweaking for branding purposes) and saved literally thousands of dollars. Another good example is the California courts Self-Help site, (<http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp/>), where much time and thought has been spent collecting legal and other information for low-income users in California. Leveraging existing online sites as the foundation of a this key resource is the best cost-effective model.

To this end, Pro Bono Net, in conjunction with AARP, built a TBSHC web portal that takes advantage of many of the existing statewide legal websites, while allowing the TBSHC staff to add information and links appropriate to its work and consumers. This web portal includes access to all of the legal referral and other information collected on a

state's legal services statewide website, full text searching, access to the most popular resources from any site page, and password-protection to access document generation software and other tools not yet available to the general public. Contact [info@probono.net](mailto:info@probono.net) for further information.

## **B. Document Generation Software**

Helping litigants create documents can be a central component of a TBSHC. There is existing document generation software that can be programmed to create complaint letters, legal forms, and other needed documents. These programs such as HotDocs, Rapidocs, and GhostFill are widely used in the private legal sector to aid consumers and advocates.

As part of the legal services statewide website projects discussed earlier, the Legal Services Corporation funded a project to incorporate the HotDocs online document generation software into the statewide sites. (This was also made possible through a generous software donation by LexisNexis.) This means a legal services statewide website will allow a volunteer to generate a final, customized form or letter by entering the consumer's answers to a pre-determined set of questions asked by the software. Before making a separate expenditure for this software, a TBSHC should contact their legal services state project for further details regarding implementation and use. Learn more about this project at <http://www.lstech.org/workgroups/hotdocs>.

## **C. Equipment and Environment**

1. Furnishings: The basic workstation for use by consumers is a chair and a computer. If the consumer will receive help navigating the site, another chair is

needed for the volunteer or staff assistant. If the consumer is to have access to a legal hotline or other legal service, a telephone must be available. A printer should be available to print out documents and information. Access to a copier is also useful.

2. Files: the maintenance of files depends on the nature of the TBSHC. If the TBSHC site is basically helping the consumer deal with the technology and the service is entirely self-help, files are not needed. The consumer should be told that no files are maintained and that the TBSHC has no obligation to the consumer other than to facilitate their use of the internet. TBSHC s operated by legal services and other agencies, where the TBSHC is trying to help clients solve problems, may require files to maintain the intake information and a summary of what was provided to the client. These papers can be stapled together and filed alphabetically.
  
3. Materials: The AARP/LCE TBSHC has developed a range of materials to facilitate the operation of the TBSHC including:
  - Volunteer Training Manual
  - Website Instruction Manual, which explains how to log onto the website and provides a detailed explanation of how to navigate each section and feature of the website. This includes how to find information on specific issues; create legal documents, pleadings and letters; conduct a benefits

check-up; locate step-by-step self-help guides; request government services; obtain vital records; locate an appropriate referral agency; etc.

- A Legal Information Guide, which provides a written index to all the information on the website arranged by legal issue area (e.g. consumer, employment, divorce).
- General Overview of TBSHC Website, which provides an overview of the content of the site.

4. Publications: It is helpful to have printed copies of the most commonly requested information on the website. This saves the time and expense of printing out individual copies for each client. It is also helpful to have copies of useful self-help publications which are not available on the website to supplement the website's content. Some TBSHC s post a list of the most frequently used content, so a client can select those useful to him or her.
5. Forms: some TBSHC s have intake forms and forms where volunteers and staff summarize the client's problem and the written information provided to the client. TBSHC staff and volunteers are not authorized to provide oral information or advice other than to read and explain written information on the website.
6. Internet connection: This can be a significant problem particularly in low-income communities. Many agencies and other entities (e.g. churches) in low income neighborhoods do not have internet service. Unless a wireless connection to the

internet is possible through a cell phone, these agencies can't serve as TBSHC sites. Another problem is that some agencies that have internet connection do not have a high speed connection, plus their connection is subject to frequent interruptions. This can create havoc in a TBSHC. When this happens, clients are usually advised to return the next day for copies of website information or documents. Another issue that can arise in a TBSHC that is based in a court or large host agency is a concern for letting customers or non-court staff have access to the internet without strong firewall protection, since the strength of the internet is in the opportunity to link to a wide variety of resources, it's important to consider either a separate internet connection or training that requires the navigator to utilize the internet carefully.

7. Security of Equipment:

If the host agency is providing the equipment at the TBSHC site, security at the site becomes an issue. Some TBSHC hosts have had equipment stolen. One solution is to use laptop computers and cell phones which can be locked up at night or taken home by the host agency staff.

## **D. Content**

While the exact content a TBSHC will want to provide will vary depending on its purpose as discussed in Section II, C. Service Definition and Establishment, there are common types of content that are important regardless of whether addressing legal or health needs, as examples.

1. Basic information. Consumers coming to a self-help center will be searching for basic information on their problem. The TBSHC will want to collect and index the best content on the web for the particular services topic the center covers. Offering a broad selection of substantive information is central to a TBSHC's success.
2. Forms. Even if the TBSHC cannot offer automatic document generation ability, having relevant forms available for consumers is very important. Librarians often cite access to legal forms as their consumers' number one legal question. Knowing exactly where to find the right forms online is a very important service.
3. How-to or Step-by-Step Directions. This content is critical when creating a self-help office. Whether it is help navigating a municipal government system or answering a petition, walking through step-by-step directions with the consumer about the information the TBSHC staff finds and provides is the critical link to success by the consumer. In the DC SHO model for example, a consumer leaves the center with written instructions on what additional steps to take along with a verbal explanation of these steps.

## **VII. Volunteer Management**

### **A. Definition of Role**

The basic duties of TBSHC volunteers are to:

- Greet and interview the customers to determine what legal question or problem they have (consult with supervisor if necessary).
- Help the customers navigate the TBSHC website to find the information, document, or referral that the customer needs; assist them to print out the information. For illiterate customers, read the materials to them.
- If documents are prepared, document the facts of the cases and attach a copy of all materials. Send these to the supervisor for review.

A typical meeting between the volunteer and customer would involve the following volunteer tasks:

- Greet the customer and have them fill out the intake sheet including any required eligibility information.
- If the customer is eligible for services, explain that you are not an attorney or paralegal but will help the customer obtain the information, documents and referrals they need using a website.
- Explain to the customers and have them sign a disclaimer acknowledging that the TBSHC helps the customers help themselves; that they are not receiving legal help; and that once they leave the site, the TBSHC staff and volunteers have no further responsibilities for the clients' matters. Remind them that they are encouraged to come back as often as they need.
- Review the intake sheet to determine whether the customer is eligible for services.
- Explain that the interview is confidential.

- Gather information about the customer’s question or problem; use a checklist to determine if the customer’s matter requires legal assistance (e.g. letter from landlord, foreclosure notice, court pleadings; denial or termination of public benefits, home repair/or other solicitation scams, defendant in lawsuit, customer is being asked to sign something, received a summons, notice of levy from IRS). If so, the customer can still be helped but should also receive a referral to an attorney or legal services office.
- Volunteer and customer work as a team to navigate website to:
  - Find relevant information
  - Locate useful referral sources
  - Draft a document or court pleading
  - Complete a public benefits check up at [www.benefitscheckup.org](http://www.benefitscheckup.org) .
- Volunteers provide customers with copies of all prepared documents, the website information, and the signed disclaimer.
- If necessary, volunteer reads documents or information from the website to the customer and helps them understand it. Volunteer does not add their own advice to this mix. Bi-lingual volunteers can translate information for non-English speaking customers.
- Volunteer reminds customers that TBSHC has no further responsibility for client’s matter but encourages him or her to return as often as they want.
- Volunteer faxes notes and all materials given to customer to the supervisor for review

## **B. Recruitment.**

There have been many books written about various methods of recruiting volunteers. One method that works well for initiating a TBSHC project is to mail solicitations to older residents in the zip codes that you would like to target. Generally it requires 100-200 letters to recruit a person who actually ends up volunteering. One can buy these mailing lists from companies. Targeting middle and upper middle income seniors between the age of 60 and 75 works the best. The advantage of this approach is that all the volunteers are recruited at the same time, so only one orientation and only one training session will be required. Also the mailing can be targeted at seniors who live near the TBSHC. After a core of volunteers is established, additional volunteers can often be recruited from the friends and relatives of existing volunteers.

A TBSHC project is a very attractive volunteer position for these older volunteers. A disadvantage of older people is that some are not computer proficient; also the TBSHC must plan for the fact that the volunteers will be absent periodically to allow travel, vacations, etc. However older volunteers tend to volunteer for many years; 10 or 15 years is not unusual. Law students and even college students are another good source. Most are computer savvy. Their disadvantage is that they usually only volunteer for a short period of time which requires more frequent recruitment and training.

The qualities required of TBSHC volunteers are:

- Computer skills or willingness to learn
- Ability to use the internet or willingness to learn
- Attention to detail
- Good listening and note taking skills

- Ability to probe for information and draw out the client
- Desire to help people of diverse backgrounds
- Willingness to volunteer at least once a week for at least 4 or 5 hours
- Self motivation
- Patience and empathy
- Dependability
- Ability to work with minimum supervision

Other effective recruitment techniques include:

- Listing ads in community newspapers or campus newspapers
- Radio public service announcements
- Posters in public places and stores
- Recruitment at large community events
- Door-to-door flyers near TBSHC locations

### **C. Screening**

Once volunteers are recruited, there should not be a long delay before they are screened and trained. If there is a long delay, notify the volunteers by mail and encourage them to stay interested. An efficient screening technique is to invite the newly recruited volunteers to attend an orientation session offered at several times. This is done in lieu of interviewing each volunteer separately. At these sessions the volunteer jobs can be discussed in detail with an opportunity to answer questions. At the end of the session, the people still interested in volunteering can set a training date. In preparation for the orientation session, the prospective volunteers should be sent materials describing the volunteer opportunity.

## **D. Training**

The volunteers will need to be trained to accomplish their tasks at the TBSHC.

Here are the topics that should be covered:

- Discussion of the volunteers' responsibilities including maintaining confidentiality; overview of how the TBSHC works.
- Overview of the entity which is managing the TBSHC (volunteers like to know where they are on the organizational chart).
- Interview techniques.
- Review of intake forms and disclaimers.
- Volunteers role playing an interview and the completion of the intake process.
- Overview of website contents and materials to help volunteers navigate the website.
- Practice navigating website.
- Overview of the main substantive issues volunteers will be addressing using content from website.
- Review of TBSHC procedures.
- Volunteers role playing the explanation of information to the customer from the website.

You should discuss who the volunteers should contact when they need help with the office equipment, office supplies, etc and who to call when they are not able to volunteer on their regular day. Also discuss when volunteers should ask for help and have their work reviewed.

Basics of adult learning are that:

- Learning is a natural human process.
- Learners must feel appreciated and accepted.
- Learners must have their current needs met.
- Learners will only learn what they think they need to know.
- Learners learn best when they are ready to learn.
- Learners retain relevant information better.
- Learners retention is improved with repetition.
- Learning is most effective when received in small, digestible pieces. Each piece must be integrated and assimilated with what was presented before.
- Learners must be given a chance to communicate and apply the information in order to retain it.
- Learners learn by doing. 50% of information obtained in a passive way is forgotten.
- Old Chinese proverb:
  - I hear and I forget
  - I see and I remember
  - I do and I understand

Tips for a successful training are:

- Train in short multiple sessions, if possible.
- Provide volunteers with training agenda and directions to the training site prior to the event.
- Make time for informal interaction during the training, so volunteers can get to know each other. Camaraderie will aid in volunteer retention.

- Provide refreshments at breaks if possible.
- Consider teaming participants for short periods of time as part of training design.
- Ask for feedback at end of training to help improve the next event.
- Prepare a written training plan and agenda.
- Use innovative approaches to training; they work the best.
- Involve experienced volunteers in the training of new ones.

When you're adding only a few volunteers to the volunteer pool, the best way to provide training is to give the basic information, one-on-one, and then have the new volunteer observe other volunteers serving clients. When the new volunteer is comfortable, he or she can serve the client with the experienced volunteer or staff person looking on.

You should offer continuing training to refresh key information and to help the volunteers master areas they need to improve. Use meetings with the volunteers to “brainstorm” training needs. Or you can conduct surveys to determine where the volunteers are encountering problems. You can also record the questions volunteers frequently ask and provide additional training in those areas. Consider a periodic review of the job basics.

## **E. Volunteer Supervision and Evaluation**

This is the key to achieving success in a volunteer program. When a program fails, it is usually because of inadequate supervision. In this regard volunteers are like staff. If they don't receive attention, coaching or recognition, they don't perform as well

as they are able. One or more staff persons must be assigned the responsibility of supervising the volunteers.

When a TBSHC is first established, it is important to have a staff person (a paralegal or attorney) at the TBSHC site. The staff person can sit with the volunteers while they are serving customers and coach them as needed. An attorney should be available by phone for questions that the paralegal can't handle. As the volunteers become more experienced, the paralegal can work off site and manage several TBSHC sites by phone. To ensure quality, it is important to have a qualified staff person (e.g. an attorney) review interview notes, generated documents and information from the website that was given to the customer. If errors were made, this staff person can take corrective action.

If the supervision is provided off-site, it is important that there be staff at the site who can help the volunteers with routine matters such as providing office supplies, fixing equipment failures, and providing security. This is the typical arrangement when the TBSHC is located in a community agency. The agency staff can handle the security and provide logistical support and the substantive supervision can be provided by telephone by the entity responsible for the TBSHC s.

A TBSHC located in a court should have an on-site attorney supervisor given the high volume of customers and the legal nature of the information provided. The following principles are key to deciding what the supervision should be:

- Volunteers need recognition and occasional challenges.
- Volunteers, particularly older ones, need the flexibility to be absent for periods of time.

- If some staff resentment occurs through the use of volunteers, this must be addressed. Possible solutions are to encourage professional relationships between the volunteers and the staff. One can also develop a “contract” between these staff and the volunteers so everyone knows their role.
- Volunteers need to be clear about who to contact when they need help. The staff providing logistical support to the volunteers may be different than those providing substantive support.
- The supervisor’s expectations of the volunteers must be clear to the volunteer. This can be accomplished through job descriptions, an agreement that the volunteer signs, procedures and rules, and training.
- The volunteers need feedback on how they are doing. When a volunteer is new, every case that the volunteer handles should be reviewed and prompt feedback provided to the volunteer. After the volunteer becomes more experienced, every matter stills needs to be reviewed, but feedback can be periodic.
- There should always be someone to welcome the volunteers when they come to the TBSHC.
- The supervisor should make an effort to contact the volunteers on their workday; this can be done by phone if necessary.
- Volunteers need to know the tasks they must perform, during each of their work days.

- Use volunteer attendance logs (sign in and sign out). These can be used to recognize performance, identify unreliable volunteers who may need coaching, and to measure the value of volunteers in dollar terms.
- You should hold periodic group meetings with the volunteers; this is an opportunity to discuss issues that will improve their performance and to create camaraderie among the volunteers. Volunteers can also get questions answered and seek counsel on problematic cases. It also allows the supervisor to receive feedback on volunteer concerns and frustrations.

Here is a checklist of supervisor responsibilities:

- Check all the initial work of the volunteer and provide immediate feedback.
- Check work as soon as possible after actual performance.
- Check work on an ongoing basis and provide periodic feedback.
- Monitor work for quantity and quality.
- Discuss concerns and problems with volunteers
- Provide positive as well as negative feedback.

Here is how to handle volunteer work problems:

- Work together with all staff who have significant contact with the volunteer.
- Determine if task is beyond volunteer's capability; if so consider changing tasks.
- Provide additional training as needed.
- Reiterate work performance requirements.
- Ask the volunteer how you can help them improve.
- Allow sufficient time for the volunteer to improve.

If these steps don't work you may have to let the volunteer go. If so, be clear why you are terminating the volunteer. Also try to refer the volunteer to another opportunity. Be sure to thank the volunteer for their service in writing.

## **VIII. Some Examples of Technology Based Self Help**

### **Centers**

#### **A. Self Help Office Operated by AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly (AARP/LCE)**

AARP-LCE operates four self-help centers in Washington, D.C. These Self Help Offices (SHOs) allow AARP/LCE to have a physical presence in many more communities and to effectively use a currently underutilized resource: non-attorney volunteers. These volunteers do not provide legal advice or representation but instead help clients navigate a specially created website. A paralegal supervises the volunteers. The SHOs provide an impressive array of services using the website including:

- A broad selection of legal information licensed from Nolo press, the largest publisher of legal self-help materials (much more detailed than that available on Nolo's web site).
- The answers to the 90 of the most commonly asked questions from AARP/LCE's legal advice line; the answers are written for a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.
- A wide variety of self-help brochures published by the FTC, AARP/LCE, and others that give step-by-step guidance on how to resolve certain routine legal problems.

- A collection of model letters that address common complaints that clients have with businesses (e.g., unreturned security deposit). There is also a database of addresses of the complaint departments of most major businesses, worldwide. Each letter includes the names and addresses of regulatory agencies in the body of the letter to which copies will be sent. The website software allows a volunteer to generate a final, customized letter by entering the client's answers to questions asked by the software. We have found that well written letters sent to the correct addresses with copies sent to appropriate regulatory agencies listed in the body of the letters have over an 80% success rate.
- A small claims court complaint form with instructions on how to file the complaint in court, directions to the courthouse, a list of proof that should be brought to the small claims hearing for the most common legal problems, and a description of how the hearing will be conducted. The software will soon allow a volunteer to generate a customized complaint by entering the client's answers to questions posed by the software.
- A public benefits check-up program. (see [www.benefitscheckup.org](http://www.benefitscheckup.org)) By answering the software's questions, the program indicates all federal and local benefits for which a client may be eligible; the website contains information for every state. It also provides the location of the nearest benefits office, instructions on how to get to office via public transportation, and a list of information/documents that clients should take with them.

- Assistance with obtaining government services. Contains templates for requesting most government services (e.g., removal of: dead tree, abandoned car, trash) and generates an e-mail to the proper government agency. Results are monitored to identify any systemic problems (e.g., discrimination in the distribution of services).
- Assistance with obtaining vital records. Contains addresses of most agencies that house vital records. Letters can be generated requesting copies of these documents.
- A program that generates most legal documents by having clients answer a series of questions posed by the software; the answers are entered by volunteers (e.g., will, power of attorney, promissory note).
- A program that generates court pleadings for most common legal problems by having clients answer a series of questions via volunteers (e.g. uncontested divorce, name change).
- Assistance with applying for government benefits. Soon, some government agencies will allow clients to complete and file an application for benefits online (e.g. SSA, VA).
- Legal advice. Clients can call the AARP/LCE legal advice line from the SHO. These calls receive priority treatment from the advice line staff.
- Referrals to other legal aid programs or community services. The website contains an extensive list of such agencies with eligibility criteria for each.

The SHOs operate as follows. They are open one or two days a week generally from 10 am to 3:00 pm. Clients must make appointments, but walk-ins are

accommodated if possible. There are several workstations, one for the paralegal when onsite, and the others for the non-attorney volunteers. A workstation consists of a table, a computer with a modem, and a telephone and two chairs: one for the paralegal/volunteer and the other for the client. There is also a printer, fax, and scanner in the office. There are brochure racks containing useful legal information for clients. The paralegal/volunteer and the client sit at the computer. An intake form is completed and the client explains the purpose of the visit. If the client needs a service(s) available at the SHO, the paralegal/volunteer navigates the website and delivers the service using a website instruction manual. When the software requests information from the client, the paralegal/volunteer enters it into the website. If the client needs legal information, the paralegal/volunteer can consult an index of all information available on the website or in hard copy at the office. Also the paralegal/volunteer can do a search of the website using “key words.” Information on the website is printed, explained and given to the client. This insures that it is current as material is continually being updated on the website.

If the paralegal/volunteer does not know what to do, s/he calls the AARP/LCE headquarters for direction. If the client needs legal advice, this is provided by the AARP/LCE advice line staff and is documented and monitored for quality in the same manner as all other advice line calls. If the advice line attorney believes the client needs additional services of AARP/LCE, the client is scheduled for an appointment at AARP/LCE headquarters.

When the client leaves, s/he is told what additional steps, if any, should be taken. These are also provided in a writing, which contains a disclaimer that the office will not take any other action on the client’s matter; the client must sign the writing

acknowledging that s/he understands the disclaimer. The client is, of course, encouraged to return to the office if more help is required for their problem. The client must be clear that the SHO does not have any more responsibility for his or her case. No conflict check is administered as no attorney-client relationship is established.

As described above in this manual, there are two rules which govern the operation of these outreach offices: (1) no legal advice is provided except through the legal advice line, and (2) once the client leaves the office, the office paralegal and volunteers have no further obligations to the client, and the client is so notified. The second rule is key because it preserves the self-help nature of the service and prevents the office from generating a caseload. If a caseload was generated at an outreach office, it would have to be closely monitored to insure it was competently handled.

The website software allows any legal document or pleading generated at the SHO to be e-mailed to the main office for legal review. The E-mail also includes the answers to all the questions that were used to generate the document or pleading. This gives AARP/LCE the ability to provide a legal review, modify the documents, and E-mail them back to the SHO for signing.

The cost of the SHO is extremely low consisting of the part-time salary of a paralegal, telephone costs, office supplies, and an Internet provider service. The space is usually free.

## **B. SHO Network Operated by State of Virginia**

SeniorNavigator is a free, statewide public-service, non-profit, whose mission is to provide comprehensive health and aging information to seniors and their caregivers,

supporting independence, confidentiality, dignity and quality of life. It combines community-building and information technology, providing information about over 18,500 public and private local programs and services.

To create the website, over 1,000 individuals participated in focus groups and community steering committees to ensure that this site would truly address the needs of seniors, their family members, caregivers, and the aging network. What were consumers looking for? A safe and confidential online environment where they could easily find the answers about their health and aging concerns and also find a comprehensive listing of available local resources for medical, long-term care, legal, financial, and housing services. *SeniorNavigator* responded by developing a noncommercial site where consumers can conduct an integrated search and find information and local services all in one place. It is credentialed by “Health on the Net” to protect the privacy of the consumer and ensure that information is current and reliable. SeniorNavigator meets the needs of the entire aging population regardless of race, income level or locality within the state through its community access network. SeniorNavigator Centers serve as community access points for individuals without Internet capabilities. Through these community partnerships, SeniorNavigator provides promotional materials and trains volunteers who assist seniors and caregivers in finding the health and aging information they so critically need.

The technology component is a consumer friendly website with:

- An in-depth database, detailing over 18,500 local services, presented in a variety of styles, and consolidated into one easy access point –a unique and valuable service to Virginians;

- Hundreds of informative articles that empower consumers to make decisions;
- “Ask an Expert”, where consumers can confidentially ask questions to one of our 31 volunteer specialists;
- A “Community Calendar”, which provides information on everything from health and fitness programs to educational workshops;
- “My Neighborhood”, where visitors can participate in neighbor to neighbor discussions; and
- “Things You Should Know”, which features time-sensitive health or aging-related information.

The human touch is provided by:

- 131 *SeniorNavigator* Centers, established in partnership with community senior centers and meal sites, libraries, hospitals, police stations and churches, where volunteers help Virginia’s seniors find nursing home placement, support groups, transportation, answers to Medicare questions and more. The number of *SeniorNavigator* Centers continues to grow as new Centers request training as a way to bridge the digital divide and provide access to information for those who might not otherwise be reached.
- The Ask an Expert feature on SeniorNavigator.com gives Virginians a chance to receive personal one-on-one attention to address any concerns they may have related to health and aging. Ask an Expert is powered by thirty one subject matter experts who volunteer their time to help people in need find comfort, resolution and answers. The expert panel consists of: nurses, financial consultants, social

workers, lawyers, geriatricians, a caregiver advocate, an occupation therapist, a regulatory specialist and a physician assistant.

Impact of the program:

- Over 18,500 current public and private programs and services listed in database
- Over 27,000 visitors per month
- Over 35 minutes average visit length
- 131 SeniorNavigator Centers serve as community access points across the state
- Over 9,000 professionals and volunteers trained to serve as SeniorNavigators
- 17 Statewide and national partners
- Endorsed by 13 leading health and aging organizations

Partnerships:

Nearly 150 organizations, corporate, non-profit, and government--from technology companies to health care systems, foundations to state agencies, senior centers to libraries—work together to make *SeniorNavigator* a great collaborative success.

### **C. Legal Self-Help Center in Marin County, California**

The new Legal Self-Help Center (LSHC) in Marin County opened in 2003. It is located across the street from the courthouse in the same building as Legal Aid of the North Bay, and the Family and Children's Law Center. The county law library is in an adjacent building. All persons are welcome to use the LSHC. The LSHC provides services to people to assist them in learning about law and court procedures pertinent to their legal concerns. It does not provide legal advice or representation.

Free services offered by the LSHC include:

- Legal information and referrals to agencies that provide legal and social services.
- Attorney and support staff: The LSHC has attorneys and support staff onsite to assist with legal processes, including document preparation and court procedures.
- The Family Law Facilitator is available every afternoon to answer child support and related questions, assist in preparing court documents, calculate child and family support obligations, and advise individuals on and assist with court procedures.
- The Small Claims Advisor (formerly located in the clerks office) is onsite each day to assist in the procedures for filing Small Claims actions.
- Public Research Stations: There are public research workstations with computer terminals for individuals to use in preparation of legal documents. Web access is available to conduct self-guided research and to create forms. Access to numerous English and non-English legal websites, covering a wide array of topics is available. Staff is on hand to assist individuals with questions and enable them to access pertinent information.
- I-CAN! available on-line: I-CAN! is a web-based legal services system that utilizes a video guide in which users are prompted through a series of tutorial-type questions to simplify the process of filling out commonly used court forms.

- EZLegalFile available on-line: EZLegalFile is a web-based forms completion program that assists litigants to fill out commonly used court forms.
- A court clerk is available to assist litigants in filing procedures, document preparation and review for the Marin Superior Court.
- Videos are available in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Korean on a number of subjects to preview in the LSHC audio/video room.
- Workshops are offered on a variety of topics including Bankruptcy, Immigration, Orders After Hearing, Restraining Orders, Living Trusts, and Child Custody and Visitation. Workshops are offered by staff, volunteers and representatives from collaborating community agencies.
- Mediation Services: Mediation Services are on site two days per week. Mediators are available to help resolve a variety of disputes: tenant/landlord, small claims, neighbor disputes, etc. Fees are based on a sliding scale. Mediation services are available for drop-ins as well as scheduled appointments.
- Low Cost Notary Services: Notary Services are available at the LSHC. The fee to have a document notarized is \$10.

The LSHC is sponsored by a collaborative effort of community organizations including: the Marin Superior Court, Legal Aid of the North Bay, Family and Children's Law Center, Bay Area Legal Aid, Marin County Bar Association, Marin Mediation Services, Canal Community Alliance, Catholic Charities Southeast Asian Advocacy Project, Novato Human Needs Center, Marin County Law Library, Marin County Office of the

Public Defender, District Attorney Consumer Protection Division, Marin Center for Independent Living, Marin Housing, Latino Council of Marin, Whistlestop, Community Action Marin, Department of Child Support Services, and Health & Human Services Office of the Public Guardian.

#### **D. SHO Operated by Atlanta Legal Aid Society and Georgia Legal Services Program**

This model takes the TBSHC on the road! In 2002, Atlanta Legal Aid Society and Georgia Legal Services Program partnered to create the Mobile Law Units (MLU) project. Based on the SHO model developed by AARP Legal Counsel for the Elderly, the MLU project aims to overcome access barriers for seniors and rural populations of Georgia by bringing legal information directly to the consumer. In this model, the MLUs are staffed by legal aid attorneys and paralegals who take laptop computers to senior centers, public libraries, courts, and even apartment complexes. The staff uses Georgia's statewide website, [www.LegalAid-GA.org](http://www.LegalAid-GA.org), for access to needed information and forms when working with consumers. In addition, because the staff are legal aid advocates, they can also access their program's case management systems and resources to streamline conflicts checks and intake, if necessary.

To learn more about the Georgia Mobile Law Units, including project contacts, visit [http://www.lstech.org/projects/georgia\\_mobile\\_selfhelp\\_offices](http://www.lstech.org/projects/georgia_mobile_selfhelp_offices).

## **IX. Resources for TBSHC Planners and Managers – Appendices**

1. Intake: Sample forms
2. Volunteer training: sample forms and agendas
3. Communicating with the customer: sample forms and articles
4. Using non-attorney volunteers to follow-up with customers to determine the outcomes of their legal matters
5. Developing an internet volunteer program – materials developed by libraries
6. Instruction Manual for Volunteers – Superior Court of California, County of Ventura, Self-Help Legal Access Center
7. Ethics – Governing rules and Models
8. Resources to assist Spanish-speaking customers
9. Pro Se Resource Links – to program information and resources