

**ACTION PLAN TO ASSIST SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS**

***1. Description of Need:***

In May of 2001, this court applied for funding to develop a community focused action plan to serve self-represented litigants. That funding was granted in June of 2001.

In that application, the court envisioned using one or more consultants to assist in developing its plan. However, because of Mono County's remote location in the Eastern Sierras, the court was not successful in retaining a consultant with any specialized expertise. Therefore, the court pursued development of its plan with existing staff, supplemented by a summer law student intern specifically hired to assist in this project.

The court prepared both an attorney and community at large survey which was distributed to a sampling of both stakeholder groups; however, in both instances, responses were disappointingly few. Therefore, the court reviewed its non-criminal filings for the past year to glean information about self-represented litigants. This review provided more meaningful results: 27% of the cases reviewed had at least one self-represented litigant; both litigants were self-represented in 17 % of the cases reviewed. The breakdown by type of case was as follows: TRO's - 38%, Dissolutions - 31%, Unlawful Detainers - 13%, Personal Injury - 9%, all others - 9%.

Based on the information obtained from the case reviews, the court decided to offer on-site legal assistance for a temporary trial period as follows. Local attorneys, practicing primarily family law, were engaged by the court to be available for free legal consultation and assistance to self-represented litigants at the court's offices every Tuesday from 10 am to 2 pm for four successive Tuesdays spanning two months. If an attorney on duty did not have the appropriate expertise, the person seeking help was referred to an on-call attorney who did. The court advertised this service in the local newspaper and via radio public announcements.

On the four Tuesdays in question, the attorneys assisted 22 persons as follows: 13 family law matters, 6 general civil matters, 1 TRO, 1 bankruptcy, 1 small claim.

The court's review with the attorneys involved indicates that the availability of such free legal consultation and assistance was beneficial and served its purpose well. In addition, the attorneys also felt that a paralegal could have been of sufficient assistance in many of the cases, and that a Spanish interpreter would have been beneficial in about a third of the cases.

Based on the above, the court concludes that its self-represented litigant needs are as follows:

- i. Limited on-site (clerk's office) attorney availability for consultation with and assistance to self-represented litigants, augmented by the on-site availability of paralegal and Spanish interpreting assistance.
- ii. Legal self-help Internet access.
- iii. On-site internet access for information and forms for litigants who do not otherwise have such access.
- iv. Strong, regular advertisement and communication of the services available from the court.

2. ***Program Areas:***

The court initially plans to have a four-pronged action plan as follows:

- i. On-site legal consultation with paralegal with Spanish interpreting also assistance also available.
- ii. Inclusion of legal self-help information and links to other such Internet sites on a court-hosted Internet website.
- iii. Providing on-site computers and access assistance for those who do not have Internet access personally.
- iv. A strong advertising and communication program to inform the community about the self-help services available from the court.

3. ***Program Action Plans:***

- a. **Program Description:** For all four aspects described above:
- b. **Program Partners:** Local attorneys, paralegals and Spanish interpreters; web development consultant.
- c. **Program Plan:** Not specifically laid out, but will continue to be conducted by Court Executive Officer and his staff.
- d. **Existing Resources That Will Be Used:** Remaining funds (approximately \$4,000) from initial grant referred to above, supplemented by part-time allocation of existing staff to conduct and monitor program, assignment of existing computer equipment to program, and allocation of limited additional trial court operations funds as may be needed.
- e. **Additional Resources Needed:** Not identified initially; but additional resources will be required based on further evaluation of these programs.

- f. **Evaluation:** Numbers/types of assistance; feedback from program partners and beneficiaries.
  
- 4. ***State Support:*** Continuation/expansion of current "California Courts Online Self-Help Center"; more public advertisement of this service. Making other larger county services available to smaller, rural counties where feasible.
  
- 5. ***Unique Approaches:*** Not known.
  
- 6. ***Sustaining the Action Plan:*** Inclusion of funding for such services in 2003-04 and subsequent budget requests.
  
- 7. ***Other Comments:*** None.