

ACTION PLAN TO ASSIST SELF-REPRESENTED LITIGANTS***I. Description of Need:***

The Superior Court of Solano County serves both geographically and ethnically diverse populations many that choose to represent themselves in court. Self-represented litigants cross all economic lines, even those that can afford an attorney or have retained an attorney in the past. Many self-represented litigants are involved in multiple procedures. Some are mentally ill. Most cannot afford high attorney fees. Some self-represented litigants stay in the system for years and bring others into the system. There are a large number of illiterate self-represented litigants (not just the poor) who have difficulty reading instructions and understanding procedures. Generally, self-represented litigants are ill prepared for court and require additional time from the judicial officer.

Some court services currently exist in Solano County to serve the needs of self-represented litigants. Most of these services are not funded at the level that adequately meets the needs.

- The court sponsors the family law facilitator program to assist litigants in understanding the law, providing assistance with completion of documents and general information.
- The small claims mediation program provides the parties with an opportunity to meet with a mediator prior to court to determine an acceptable agreement.
- There is a supervised visitation program (Rainbow) available in Vacaville and Vallejo that provides supervised exchanges of children, supervised visitation, parenting classes and counseling services.
- The court has recently started an in court mediation program where mediation is immediately available to couples that have not completed the process to make child custody arrangements. This has already substantially reduced continuances with either full or partial agreements in place for 88% of the cases referred.
- The court has developed a web site and publications to assist in filing papers for Guardianships, unlawful detainer proceedings.
- The court is in the process of developing an information booth in the Fairfield Hall of Justice.
- The county sponsors the Law Library, which provides law books and legal research tools for use by the public. The Law Library is adding two on-line terminals for research this year.

In addition to the programs sponsored by the court a number of community resource agencies provide assistance to self-represented litigants. Following are some of the agencies that assist with meeting the needs:

- *Legal Services of Northern California* (LSNC) provides free legal assistance to those that are income eligible at 125% of poverty (e.g. \$952 monthly for a single person). Advocates primarily help in the areas of Housing, Health Rights, Senior Legal services (civil law for persons 60 or

- over), Uncontested Divorce Clinic, Assistance, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), In-Home Support Services, Unemployment Benefits, Homeless Assistance Funds, or other public benefits). LSNC provide assistance to complete forms and provide self-help "how-to" packets for people who are income eligible. They rarely represent parties in court.
- *SafeQuest* assists victims of domestic violence with forms and information regarding court/legal procedures, and how to present the case in court. *SafeQuest* assists in preparing orders after hearing and making law enforcement contacts. They provide assistance in bringing parties together for agreements or stipulations.
 - *The Solano County Bar Association* members sponsor a lawyer in the library program in the Vallejo area that gives free 20-minute consultations with an attorney.

The numbers of self-represented litigants are increasing. There used to be a small number of self-represented litigants with the majority of litigants represented by counsel. Now the reverse is true in family law. It is estimated that over 70% of parties in family law cases represent themselves. The Family Law Facilitator makes 29,000 service contacts with self-represented litigants per year in the Fairfield and Vallejo offices combined. Conservative estimates show that there are 250-300 self-represented litigants for District Attorney child support cases each month. There are approximately 2000 self-represented litigants involved in unlawful detainer actions annually.

Community organizations provide significant assistance to self-represented litigants. *SafeQuest*, the local domestic violence shelter, assist approximately 150 self-represented litigants per month in Fairfield with Temporary Restraining Orders (TROs) for domestic violence and civil harassment. The Law Library assists 75-100 self-represented litigants per week with various matters. Legal Services of Northern California serviced 1,106 clients in 2001, mainly in housing issues (73%).

There is a particular need for services to assist self-represented litigants in family law, adoptions, probate, guardianships, conservatorships and unlawful detainers. Self-represented litigants need more education in general areas such as the role of the court.

There is also a need to outreach to those who do not have English as their primary language. This is of particular concern for the facilitator services provided by the court because one half the children in the county are Spanish speaking but the family law facilitator is serving only five per cent of Spanish speaking customers. This represents a potential equity issue in court access services. Spanish and Asian languages are the primary non-English language spoken in the county.

2. *Program Areas:*

The court sponsored a planning meeting that was attended by partner organizations and court staff to determine the needs and planning priorities for self-represented litigants. The following program areas reflect the areas of proposed action for the Solano Superior Court and community organizations interested in addressing the problems of self-represented litigants.

Objective A: Increase court access to non-English speakers.

Increase court access to non-English speakers by providing more translators, publishing information in various languages and hiring bilingual staff to assist the public.

Objective B: Work with community organizations on outreach, referrals and service improvements.

Work with community agencies and universities to provide better referral networks for self-represented litigants. Develop consistent, ongoing outreach to communities.

Objective C: Provide increased services to self-represented litigants.

Increase funding, staffing and services for self-represented litigants in family law, probate, and other civil law areas. Develop a self-help center. Promote increased low-cost services, such as unbundling of cases, in the community.

Objective D: Simplify court processes and forms where feasible.

Examine procedures and forms for service improvements, and streamline where possible.

In addition the community focused strategic planning team and the court has already identified goals and objectives for improved court access for all county residents. At least nine of the strategic plan objectives directly relate to the needs of self-represented litigants and most are in the process of implementation. Following is a list of these objectives from the strategic plan:

Objective 1.1.1: Develop general court education publications.

Objective 1.1.2: Develop user pamphlets for Small Claims, Family Law, Jury, and other functions.

Objective 1.1.5: Study coordination with public transportation to improve services to court facilities.

Objective 1.1.6: Consider providing public access to Law Library through technology.

Objective 1.1.7: Establish an information booth.

Objective 1.1.9: Improve signage with changeable directories.

Objective 2.1.2: Research grant funding.

Objective 4.1.15: Expand services in the Family Law Facilitator's Office.

Objective 6.1.3: Develop an informational video for probate, guardianship and conservatorship, and make this video available to the general public and self-represented litigants.

3. *Program Action Plans:*

The court has developed action plans for each of the program objectives. These action plans contain long-term and short-term tasks, program participants and information about resources. Many of the plans will require additional resources for implementation. The following action plans contain the specific steps that the court intends to take to provide assistance to self-represented litigants.

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Objective A: Increase court access to non-English speakers.

Program Description: Increase court access to non-English speakers by providing more translators, publishing information in various languages and hiring bilingual staff to assist the public.

Program Participation: Potential participants to assist in implementing this objective are community organizations serving non-English speakers and social service agencies.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Obtain funding for translation of materials for court/public use.	Sharon Hoover	1 st Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
2. Contact local community organizations for assistance in developing bilingual information.	Sharon Hoover	2 nd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
3. Publish and distribute information.	Sharon Hoover	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
4. Contact local organizations for assistance in recruiting bilingual staff.	Linda Lecce	1 st Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
5. Develop funding to hire more interpreters.	Shann Carver	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The court will continue to use existing resources to contact local organizations and increase court access to non-English speakers.

Additional Resources Needed:

The court is planning on applying for the \$15,000 self-represented litigants implementation grant. A portion of this funding will be used to develop bilingual information materials to be distributed at the information booth.

Evaluation: Tracking the usage of various publications and information resources will provide the court feedback on the effectiveness of these information mechanisms.

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Objective B: Work with community organizations on outreach, referrals and service improvements.

Program Description: Work with community agencies and universities to provide better referral networks for self-represented litigants. Develop consistent, ongoing outreach to communities.

Program Participants: Potential local participants to assist in implementing this objective are the Universities of California at Berkeley and Davis, local community colleges, the Bar Association, social service agencies and community organizations already providing limited assistance to self-represented litigants.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Contact potential program participants and host meetings to determine mutual goals and practical actions to improve services.	Charles Ramey	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
2. Share information among community and assess the best referral methods.	Charles Ramey	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
3. Develop various methods of community outreach and referral.	Charles Ramey	4 th Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the community outreach and referral system. Revise as necessary.	Charles Ramey	On-going

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The court will continue to use existing resources to contact and collaborate with program participants.

Additional Resources Needed:

The court is planning on applying for the \$15,000 self-represented litigants implementation grant. A portion of this funding will be used to host community meetings, to develop a more effective referral network and to jointly fund community outreach efforts.

Evaluation: The court will develop at least two participation arrangements in the next year with community organizations.

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Objective C: Provide increased services to self-represented litigants.

Program Description: Increase funding, staffing and services for self-represented litigants in family law and other civil law areas. Develop a self-help center. Promote increased low-cost services, such as unbundling of cases, in the community.

Program Participants: Potential participants to assist in implementing this objective are the Administrative Office of the Courts as the primary funder of court services, granting foundations, the Bar Association and to a limited extent volunteers that would be supervised in providing services.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Assess service needs for self-represented litigants.	Charles Ramey	Completed
2. Research, apply for and obtain funding for expanded services and self-help center.	Shann Carver	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
3. Develop program, provide logistical support and training for new programs.	Charles Ramey	1 st Quarter FY 2004 – 2005
4. Prepare press releases and announcements of services.	Charles Ramey	3 rd Quarter FY 2004 – 2005
5. Start services and evaluate the program as described below.	Charles Ramey	3 rd Quarter FY 2004 – 2005

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The court has received funding to support limited services to self-represented litigants as describe in Section 1 of this report. These services will be continued and expanded to the extent possible within the existing budget.

Additional Resources Needed:

New services, such as developing the self-help center or providing facilitators for other civil law matters will need additional funding from the Administrative Office of the Court or major foundation.

Evaluation: Use surveys will identify who is using the services and why. By analyzing the data, the overall effectiveness of services can be tracked.

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Objective D: Simplify court processes and forms where feasible.

Program Description: Examine procedures and forms for service improvements, and streamline where possible.

Program Participants: Potential participants to assist in implementing this objective are other courts that have developed streamlined procedures for self-represented litigants that could be adapted for use in Solano. Community organizations and agencies such as Legal Services of Northern California and SafeQuest who are familiar with court processes and forms and already understand the needs of self-represented litigants.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Assess needs of self-represented litigants and determine areas where simplification is possible.	Claudia Archer Sharon Hoover	1 st Quarter FY 2003 – 2004
2. Contact the local community organizations for information regarding processes, simplification ideas, resources and assistance.	Claudia Archer Sharon Hoover	2 nd Quarter FY 2003 – 2004
3. Develop simplification/streamlining proposals for Bench consideration.	Claudia Archer Sharon Hoover	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
4. Identify and implement program improvement objectives.	Claudia Archer Sharon Hoover	4 th Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the simplified procedures and revise as necessary.	Claudia Archer Sharon Hoover	On-going

Existing Resources That Will Be Used: Existing staff will be assigned to this project when funding is received for consultant review of court processes.

Additional Resources Needed: The court is planning on applying for the \$15,000 self-represented-litigants planning grant. A portion of the funding will be utilized to meet with program partners on simplification ideas.

Evaluation: Tracking the time saved by the court and the public as a result of procedures simplifications will determine the overall success of the program.

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Objective 1.1.1: Develop general court education publications.

Program Description: Through the use of brochures and the print media, inform the public about the role of the court in the community.

Program Involvement: Other courts will be contacted that have developed user pamphlets that could perhaps be adapted for use.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Assess major public needs and acquire existing publications from other courts, the State Bar & AOC	Sharon Hoover	Completed 1 st Quarter FY 2001 – 2002
2. Create Court flyer for review and approval of the bench. Obtain funding and produce publications.	Sharon Hoover	Completed 3 rd Quarter FY 2001 – 2002
3. Determine distribution mechanisms within the community and the courthouses.	Sharon Hoover	Completed 3 rd Quarter FY 2001 – 2002
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the publications and revise as necessary.	Sharon Hoover	On-going

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Existing staff has been assigned to this project.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional resources are needed for implementation of this objective.

Evaluation:

Tracking the usage of the information will provide indication of overall effectiveness. A decreased number of requests for information will result from having printed material available to the public.

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Objective 1.1.2: Develop user pamphlets for Small Claims, Family Law, Jury, and other functions.

Program Description: Inform and educate the public about various case processes to enable them to be informed court users and adequately represent themselves in court. A brochure has been completed to assist unlawful detainer litigants. The next priority is to develop brochures for the guardianship and conservatorship cases.

Program Participation: Potential participants to assist in implementing this objective are: Other courts that have developed user pamphlets that could perhaps be adapted for use. Court information officers in other jurisdictions.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Acquire existing pamphlets from other jurisdictions and duplicate information provided from WEB site.	Sharon Hoover	Completed 1 st Quarter FY 2001 – 2002
2. Develop a phased plan to produce publications and secure funding.	Sharon Hoover	Completed FY 2001 – 2002
3. Develop publications in the priority order specified.	Sharon Hoover	Completed FY 2001 – 2002
4. Determine distribution mechanisms within the community and the courthouses including WEB accessibility.	Sharon Hoover	Completed FY 2001 – 2002
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the publications and revise as necessary.	Sharon Hoover	On-going

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Existing staff was assigned and have completed this project.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional resources are needed for implementation of this objective.

Evaluation:

Tracking the usage of the information and judicial opinion of better preparation in court will provide indication of overall effectiveness.

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Objective 1.1.5: Study coordination with public transportation to improve services to court facilities.

Program Description:

Coordinate public transportation bus schedules and court schedules to allow for improved court access.

Program Participants: Organizations that will be contacted to assist in implementing this objective are: Solano County Public Transportation Authority.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1 Contact transportation authorities and analyze services available, including types, cost of services, schedules, area of service.	Sharon Hoover	Completed 1 st Quarter FY 2000 – 2001
2. Provide information to the public via web site regarding directions to court facilities.	Management team	Completed 3 rd Quarter FY 2000 – 2001
3. Meet with public transportation authorities to coordinate schedules.	Charles Ramey Sharon Hoover	4th Quarter FY 2002 – 2003

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Existing resources were used to accomplish tasks 1-2.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional resources are needed for implementation of this objective.

Evaluation:

The court will become more accessible by public transportation. The public and jurors will have reduced time to get to and from the courthouse.

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Objective 1.1.6: Consider providing public access to Law Library through technology.

Program Description:

Study and implement various technical methods to provide Law Library access.

Program Participants: This objective will be implemented in collaboration with the Law Library Board of Trustees and the Law Librarian.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Acquire information on types of service and service hours currently available to the public.	Shann Carver	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
2. Assess needs for public use and identify issues associated with use.	Shann Carver Bill Reustle	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
3. Develop an improvement proposal for review by Bench and Law Library Board of Trustees. Determine implementation costs and benefits.	Shann Carver Bill Reustle	4 th Quarter FY 2003 – 2003
4. Involve Law Library staff in planning and implementation of expanded services.	Shann Carver Bill Reustle	4 th Quarter FY 2002 – 2003

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The County Law Library has used existing resources to purchase two additional public access terminals.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional resources are needed for implementation of this objective.

Evaluation:

Tracking the number of members of the public that access the Law Library will provide an indicator of overall effectiveness.

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Objective 1.1.7: Establish an information booth.

Program Description:

Establish an information booth in Fairfield and Vallejo to disseminate information. The core planning team has requested this receive a high priority for implementation.

Program Participants: The court will contact local organizations to provide information for the booth.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Survey of needs and location for information booths.	Sharon Hoover	Completed FY 2000 - 2001
2. Establish location in court facilities, secure funding and coordinate building of booths with County General Services.	Sharon Hoover	Completed – for Fairfield FY 2000 - 2001
3. Determine staffing and volunteer needs and develop a staffing plan for the booth. Gather information items.	Sharon Hoover	4 th Quarter FY 2001 – 2002
4. Establish the information booth and train staff and volunteers.	Sharon Hoover	1 st Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the information booth periodically.	Sharon Hoover	Ongoing

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The funds to construct the information booth In the Fairfield Hall of Justice have been obtained through a grant.

Additional Resources Needed:

The court is planning on applying for the \$15,000 self-represented litigants planning grant. A portion of the funding will be utilized to contract with a volunteer coordinator assist with initial staffing of the information booth.

Evaluation:

The number of public members that are served will be tallied. There should be a reduction in interruptions to court and security staff for directions.

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Objective 1.1.9: Improve signage with changeable directories.

Program Description:

Provide directories, new signage and maps for easier access to court departments and service counters.

Program Participants: Assistance in implementing this objective will be requested from the core strategic planning team, the county general services department and the security vendor.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Assess existing signs and define what information is needed.	Shann Carver	Completed FY 2000 - 2001
2. Develop a plan to upgrade signage with costs and benefits.	Shann Carver	Completed FY 2000 - 2001
3. Present the plan to the facilities committee and the core planning team for approval.	Shann Carver	Completed FY 2000 - 2001
4. Obtain vendor to create signs and install.	Shann Carver	1 st Quarter FY 2002 - 2003
5. Evaluate improvements and upgrade signage as necessary.	Shann Carver	Ongoing

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Grant funding was obtained for new signs for all court buildings and it is anticipated that this objective will be completed this year.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional funding is needed to implement this objective.

Evaluation:

The court anticipates a reduced complaints and interruptions by the public (for court staff and security officers) from the public asking for courthouse directions.

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Objective 2.1.2: Research grant funding.

Program Description:

Request and allocate funds for a grant writer. Pursue grants for alternative funding in a variety of programs especially those to implement services for self-represented litigants.

Program Participants: The Administrative Office of the Court provides opportunities for grant funding. Other potential contacts for funding to assist in implementing this objective are community foundations and criminal justice agencies such as the Office of Criminal Justice Planning.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Develop plan to meet the long and short-term needs of self-represented litigants.	Shann Carver	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
2. Request and allocate funding for grant writer and other needs.	Shann Carver	3 rd Quarter FY 2002 – 2003
3. Search for and apply for grants as opportunities arise.	Shann Carver	Ongoing

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

The court has utilized existing staff to apply for grants and funding. Grants have been obtained to assist self-represented litigants are:

- Self-represented litigants planning grant
- Information booth construction grant
- Court buildings signage grant
- Educational video grant

Additional Resources Needed: Additional funding is needed to retain a grant writer to apply for foundation, agency and AOC funding. Additional funding is needed to implement many of the recommendations in this action plan. For community grants, occasionally funding is needed for local matching.

Evaluation: At least one grant award per year. Approximately 5% of the budget shall be augmented through grant funding. Number of new programs initiated through grants.

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Objective 4.1.15: Expand services in the Family Law Facilitator's Office.

Program Description: Provide facilitator services to Vallejo and examine total services system for effectiveness, streamlining possibilities, and restructuring.

Program Participants: The Vallejo Branch Court and the County of Solano have assisted with obtaining space to enable facilitator's services to be expanded on-site in Vallejo. Assistance in expanding facilitator services may be obtained from the County of Solano, the local law schools and the Bar Association.

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Obtain funding and develop program for Vallejo Branch family law facilitators office. Start additional services.	Claudia Archer Bill Reustle	Completed 3 rd Quarter FY 2000 – 2001
2. Develop a plan to restructure services. Present plan to the core planning team and Bench.	Claudia Archer Bill Reustle	1 st Quarter FY 2002 - 2003
3. Develop and implement service restructuring.	Claudia Archer Bill Reustle	4 th Quarter FY 2000 - 2001
4. Monitor improvements and upgrade services as funding becomes available.	Claudia Archer Bill Reustle	Ongoing

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Existing resources were allocated for the Vallejo family law facilitator's office start-up. Existing staff is being used for planning expanded services.

Additional Resources Needed:

No additional funding is needed to implement this objective,

Evaluation:

Judicial evaluation: Self-represented litigants that appear before the court should be better prepared for court and have their documents in order. Intake questionnaires and facilitator statistics should show an increase in services to self-represented litigants.

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Objective 6.1.3: Develop an informational video for probate, guardianship and conservatorship, and make this video available to the general public and self-represented litigants.

Program Description: Create an informational video to assist the public in understanding court functions about probate guardianship and conservatorships.

Program Participants: Assistance in implementing this objective will be obtained from the video production vendor and members of the strategic planning team,

Program Plan:

<i>Tasks:</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>When</i>
1. Develop an overall plan for informational video (objectives, information to include, length, etc.)	Claudia Archer	Completed FY 2001 - 2002
2. Research state and local resources for collaboration opportunities.	Claudia Archer	Completed FY 2001 - 2002
3. Obtain funding and contract with video developers.	Claudia Archer	Completed FY 2001 - 2002
4. Coordinate script and scenes with video developer. Coordinate filming.	Claudia Archer	1 st Quarter FY 2002 - 2003
5. Complete video, develop use plan, dissemination plan and evaluate results.	Claudia Archer	2 nd Quarter FY 2002 - 2003

Existing Resources That Will Be Used:

Grant funding was obtained to develop educational video for probate guardianship and conservatorships.

Additional Resources Needed:

Funds to develop and disseminate other videos.

Evaluation:

The public and those that access the court have a greater understanding of the court role. The number of occasions the video is viewed will be tracked to determine usage. The number of copies requested will indicate value.

4. State Support:

The state has provided support for accomplishment of some of the strategic plan objectives that relate to self-represented litigants such as the following:

- ❑ Self-represented litigants planning grant
- ❑ Information booth construction grant
- ❑ Court buildings signage grant
- ❑ Educational video grant

Additional state support is needed in the areas of:

- ❑ Funds are needed for additional staffing, equipment and space to support additional services.
- ❑ Additional funding is needed to retain a grant writer to apply for foundation, agency and AOC funding. Additional funding is needed to implement many of the recommendations in this action plan.
- ❑ Funding to contract with and/or hire a volunteer coordinator to assist with staffing of the information booth.
- ❑ Funding will to develop bilingual information materials to be distributed at the information booth.
- ❑ Funding to continue to host meetings with community partners.

5. Unique Approaches:

Solano Superior Court held a very successful Adoptions Day on November 17, 2001 for the purpose of showcasing the positive things the court does in the community. This event was coordinated with over 40 community agencies. The court has decided that this will be an annual event. As a result of this event, there is a heightened awareness of the difficulties potential adoptive parents face once they decide to adopt. Many are self-represented litigants and are lost in a court and legal system that is complex and difficult to navigate. As a result of this awareness, the court will place a priority on developing a program and information to assist self-represented litigants with Adoption procedures.

6. Sustaining the Action Plan:

The plan for serving self-represented litigants has been integrated into the court's strategic plan since 1999. Although there was no funding to implement the nine objectives pertaining to self-represented litigants at the time the plan was developed, the court has been able to develop funding sources to address many of the needs identified by the community strategic planning team. The court plans to continue meeting with the team (at least annually) and to continue pursuing implementation of the objectives in the plan.

