

Establishing Self-Help Centers



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What is a Self-Help Center

- Court sponsored program, usually operated at and by the court
- Staff provides information on the law and the court processes to assist litigants in navigating the system and presenting their cases
- Services include explaining process, providing forms and explaining how to complete the forms

What is a Self-Help Center

- Provides services to all in a neutral and impartial manner, does not form a confidential relationship and will serve all sides in a case
- Has a major impact on litigants, judges, and the culture of the court
- Over 200 programs nationwide (100 sites in California alone)

Comprehensive Service Steps

- Litigant describes issue/need/problem
- Staffer explains role of center and asks questions to flesh out/focus
- Staffer makes triage decision
- Staffer provides basic information and forms, and may refer to services inside or outside court
- Program may provide additional on-site services such as forms review, clinics, pro bono unbundled consultation, video, etc.

Particular Advantages of SHC as Solution

- Capable of handling high volume, compared to traditional legal services delivery system
- Serves broad variety of litigants, broad variety of situations, and has impact on the courtroom and the clerk's office
- Can serve and impact all steps in the case - from before filing to compliance
- Very low cost per case, particularly in high volume courts
- Creates an informal ombudsman service to provide collective information to the judges about what is really happening in their courts

Triage Desk at Contra Costa Family Law Center



Family Law Center Triage Desk

Types of Approaches and Services

- Self-help center office in the courthouse that provides face-to-face services and self-education resources like videos, on-line tutorials, and on-line forms tools with help features
- Telephone helpline and Internet website with services centrally staffed, but without face-to-face service
- Clinics or workshops for self-represented litigants that are conducted either by a court staff attorney or volunteer attorney, addressing a range of issues
- Forms and instructions, online and in printed packets

Wide Range of Examples of SHCs and State Delivery Systems

- Minnesota – Center and high level of services in one county, statewide hotline
- Maryland – services and centers in all counties
- California – broad variety of centers with state and local funding
- Alaska – distance services only from one location
- Idaho – in a converted storage closet provides in person and phone service for entire state

Minnesota State

- Eighty-seven county courthouses and state funding for all courts
- Strategic plan for judicial branch includes expanding services for SRLs
- Statewide “Virtual” Self Help Center (website and call-center) launched 2007
- Forms, instructions, tutorials, videos, document assembly on website

Minnesota State 2

- Since '97, extensive walk-in services in Hennepin Co. serving over 43,000/yr
- Six other counties have SHC or brief advice clinics run by the court or law library
- Unbundled assistance from pro bono and legal aid programs
- Walk-in SHCs provide review of completed forms

Hennepin, MN, Self-Help Center



Alaska Statewide

- SHC offers statewide services from a centralized location by telephone and website; no in-person service
- Population spread over enormous geographic area with many customers located in remote communities accessible only by plane or boat and have no services or court
- Staff provides one-on-one services by telephone helpline; phone system provides equal access to anyone with a case in the Alaska Court System
- Has two detailed websites with forms and information

Alaska Statewide

- SRLs appreciate the convenience (many villages are off the road system can't get to court) and anonymity (especially when in small villages)
- Staff finds the process less time consuming than face-to-face services
- Provides mandatory and voluntary classes in highest volume court (Family Law Education Class, Hearing and Trial Preparation Class)

Impact of Self-Help Center on Court Effectiveness

- SRLs file more appropriate documents for their case
- SRLs are better prepared to present their cases
- Quality of self-representation at hearings is enhanced
- SRLs more likely to perceive courts as fair regardless of their own case outcome
- Public trust in courts is enhanced
- Judges have better information upon which to issue decisions

Impact on the Bar

- Bar has a place to make referrals
- Bar gets referrals from self-help center of people who might have done on own
- If other side unrepresented, can refer them to get some basic assistance and understand what bar is trying to say
- Saves time at court hearings, clerks offices,

Keys to Success for SHC

- Support of key players
- Referrals from Clerk, Court, Community to the SHC
- Well-located physical space for walk-in services or toll-free phone number for telephone helpline services
- Detailed website with forms, information and key links
- Standardized and easy to use court forms

More Keys to Success for SHC

- Attorney supervision of center
- Well-trained, dedicated, and well-managed staff
- Effective use of volunteers
- Adequate security
- Positive relationship with private attorneys
- Stable Sustained funding

Step 1

- Conduct self-assessment - where are most SRLs in your court, where is help needed?
- Identify which legal areas to start with (you will probably expand over time)
- Research other similar programs and visit them if possible to see firsthand what may be applicable
- Mobilize leadership to help with buy-in from necessary partners and to get approvals

Step 2

- Locate and equip space
- Recruit and train staff
- Develop policies and procedures
- Develop forms
- Develop public education materials about the SHC's services - brochures, business cards, posters for clerk's office, and other providers

Utilizing Technology in Self Help Centers

- Develop answers to frequently asked questions
- Written in plain English
- Interactive forms completion programs (where the program obtains the user's input in response to questions and populates the form appropriately based upon the answers)
- Provide links to websites commonly needed by SRLs
- Provide appropriate referral information

Tools to Support SHC Staff

- Provide screening questions to help direct the conversation with customers
- Provide strategies for staff to apply when they are trying to determine whether the answer requires facts or judgment
- Draft scripts for staff to get themselves out of tight corners
- Provide staff with cookie cutter scenarios to illustrate various procedures, which in turn they can use with the public

Tools to Support SHC Staff 2

- Help staff understand that it is OK to tell SHC users they have no answer to their question, solution to their problem, or place to refer them
- Provide staff with regular training opportunities and a safe place to decompress and share
- Teach staff to show empathy in a general way
- Provide training from mental health professionals on communication tips for dealing with those with mental illness