



Best Practices for Maryland Court Help Centers



Administrative Office of the Courts

Access to Justice

Juvenile & Family Services

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Introduction

In Maryland and across the country, courts report a large number of litigants appearing without counsel.¹ Litigants often go without representation in high-stakes civil matters including divorce, child custody, landlord-tenant, and foreclosure.² Recognizing that access to free legal information and advice is vital to ensure equal access to justice, the Maryland Judiciary began providing court-based help centers in the mid-1990's.

For over two decades, the Maryland Judiciary has provided brief advice and assistance to self-represented litigants in the Maryland courts. Court help center services have become a core function of the civil justice system in Maryland. These programs have been supported as critically important to the Maryland Judiciary's mission to provide fair, efficient, and effective justice for all.

Access to a lawyer benefits both self-represented litigants (SRLs) and courts. Lawyers help people understand confusing legal terminology and can advise on specific courses of action. Litigants benefit from this unique expertise. Courts benefit when litigants have a better understanding of the process, file legally sufficient pleadings and motions, and are prepared for court hearings. Court help centers remain a vital piece of the myriad of programs and services that the Maryland Judiciary offers.

Maryland court help centers are unique and operate in a variety of ways. Some are staffed by pro bono lawyers. Others use independent contractors, non-profit legal services providers, and even non-lawyer staff. Maryland court help centers deliver services both in-person and remotely via phone, live chat, email, and videoconferencing. All court-based help centers assist SRLs by providing legal information, forms assistance, and referrals.

This guide contains a broad range of topics and issues that courts should consider when they offer court-based help centers in Maryland. It is meant to be a roadmap for judges, court staff, and help center providers who operate these important programs. This guide describes the different ways in which Maryland court help centers operate, and it

¹<https://www.srln.org/system/files/attachments/ABA%20SelfHelp%20Center%20Census%20%282014%29.pdf>

² <https://www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-FullReport.pdf>

provides an overview of how effective, well-managed help centers function. In addition, it describes help center innovations, implementation strategies, and ideas for the future.

The ideas and recommendations in this guide are advisory and informational. They are not a standard or regulation and create no legal obligations. They are, rather, recommendations and descriptions of standards that may be helpful to court help centers statewide as they endeavor to provide high quality services.

Background and History

In the mid-1990s, representatives from the University of Maryland and the University of Baltimore law school approached the Judiciary about operating student-run clinics in circuit courts to assist the self-represented in family law matters. Courts quickly found these clinics to be an important asset in their efforts to serve the public. Courts outside the reach of the law schools soon began engaging local attorneys to operate similar programs. In the late nineties, courts had the opportunity to fund these programs as part of their Family Divisions and Family Services Programs as those were created to improve the family court process. Eventually, the student-run clinics were closed as they could not operate continually throughout the year and were often located far from the law schools operating them. What those clinics provided, however, was an opportunity to see the benefits of providing help to the self-represented in the courts. The courts that had originally operated student-run legal clinics began supplementing them with “Family Law Self-Help Centers” with the help and support of local providers and attorneys. Within a few years, every jurisdiction in Maryland was providing this service as a core feature of their family justice system.

In 2009, the District Court of Maryland opened its first walk-in District Court Self-Help Resource Center in Glen Burnie. Within several years, additional sites opened in Prince George’s County, Baltimore City, Wicomico County, and Baltimore County. Several satellite services were opened in smaller District Court locations where a full-time center was not feasible. In 2018, the Judiciary opened an “all civil” center in the Frederick County Courthouse. This location is home to both the District and circuit court. For this reason, help is offered in all civil matters from a single location.

To ensure that all Marylanders have access to help center services regardless of location, the Glen Burnie District Court Self-Help Resource Center began helping callers with all

District Court civil matters via phone and live chat. The remote services part of the program was launched in 2011, and later relocated to Annapolis. In 2015, staff began providing help in all civil matters, including those within the jurisdiction of circuit and District Courts alike. The expanded service is a core resource for Marylanders seeking legal help.

Maryland Court Help Center Programs

Remote Services. Operated by a contractor, the Maryland Center for Legal Assistance, LLC (MCLA), services are provided by phone, chat, email, and video conferencing. The remote services center is located in Annapolis, though staff may work from anywhere. This program assists with all civil case types, including criminal records expungement.

District Court Help Centers (walk-in, District Court civil). The District Court Help Centers are also operated via a contract with MCLA. The centers are in eight District Court locations: Baltimore City, Catonsville, Cambridge (one day per week), Glen Burnie, Hagerstown (one day per week), Salisbury, Upper Marlboro, and Frederick.

Frederick Court Help Center (walk-in, all civil). This walk-in center provides help in all civil matters and is operated by MCLA. For family law matters, a contractual attorney provides additional in-depth assistance using the Family Law Notebook. This service operates as a complement to the other help center services provided by the center.

Family Law Court Help Centers (walk-in, family law). All circuit courts have walk-in Family Law Court Help Centers. These programs are funded as part of family services jurisdictional grants from the Judiciary to individual circuit courts. They are operated under a variety of models. All provide free help to Marylanders with family law cases including child custody, child support, child access, divorce, name change, and domestic violence.

The COVID-19 health emergency significantly impacted walk-in court help center programs. In March 2020, many courts were closed to the public except for emergency matters. During these unprecedented times, courts referred litigants to the remote services center where litigants could access civil legal assistance remotely.

Guidelines and Procedures

HELP CENTER LOCATIONS AND HOURS

Help centers should be open during court hours, from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

Irregular or inconsistent hours are confusing for litigants and may complicate referrals from court staff and justice partners. Extended hours on evenings and weekends are also optimal for litigants who may not be able to take time off from work to visit a help center during normal business hours.

Keep hours, days, and locations for help centers consistent. Once they are set, try not to make changes.

Hours and location information should be clearly communicated to litigants, court staff, and justice partners. Court staff and justice partners should know where help centers are in their jurisdiction. Locations should be clearly posted on the court's website, and on www.mdcourts.gov. Program staff should use written materials such as flyers and posters, and the internet to communicate these important program details. See *WEBSITES*, page 42.

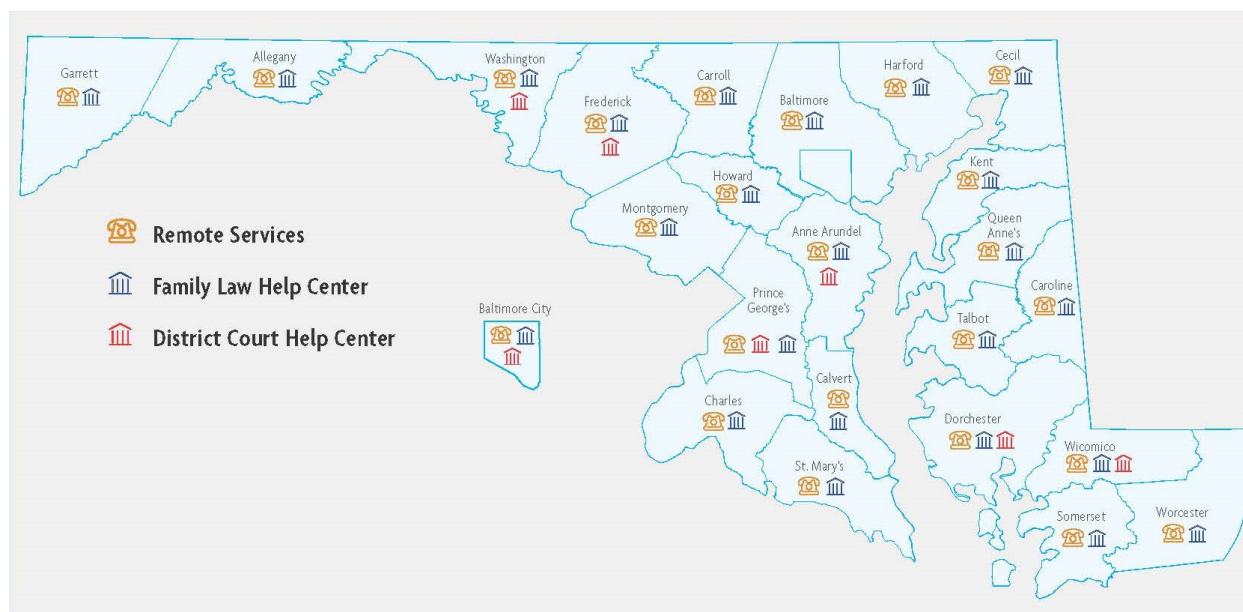


Figure 1. Statewide Help Center Interactive Map

In some jurisdictions, demand may not justify a full-time program. Here, hours should be consistent so that effective referrals may be made. When in-person service is not available, programs should refer litigants to the Judiciary’s statewide remote services help center.

Closure notices should be posted in advance. Planned program closures for court holidays or other reasons should be posted in walk-in court help centers. For urgent or unplanned closures, such as inclement weather, notice should be posted on the court’s website and on social media. If walk-in help centers are closed, referrals may be made to the statewide remote services center.

Help centers should be located in an area that is easy to find and accessible. Most help centers operate inside the courthouse. A few operate in other locations such as public libraries or community centers. Courts with public law libraries should consider co-locating help centers in the same space as the library. *See Accessibility, page 24.*

Prominent signage should be used to let members of the public know where to go and when they have arrived.



Figure 2. Maryland Court Help Logo

Help center staff should be on time and available to meet with litigants at the time the help center is scheduled to open. Advertise the time when the last litigant of the day will be taken if there is a cut off. Clearly communicate this information in advertising materials for the help center, in the waiting area, and on any sign in document or device.

If the help center operates by appointment, allow sufficient time for staff to meet with each litigant. Be sure attorney staff understand how long they may meet with each litigant. For more information on staffing, see *Staff Qualifications, Training and Supervision, page 14.*

Locations with high populations of individuals with limited English proficiency should consider posters and signage in multiple languages.



Talk with a lawyer today.

¿Necesita ayuda legal para un caso de un problema legal civil?
Hable con un abogado del Centro de Ayuda de Maryland.
Gratis. En Línea. En Persona. Por Teléfono.

410-260-1392
8:30 a.m. - 8:00 p.m.
mdcourts.gov/helpcenter

Figure 3. Maryland Court Help Center - Bilingual Poster

COURT INTEGRATION

Court help centers are a core Judiciary resource. Help center programs are most effective when they are fully integrated into local court operations.

Programs should maintain close relationships with court leadership including judges, court clerks, and court administrators. Regular meetings and frequent communication are essential to establish and maintain good working relationships. This communication also offers court help center programs with a good forum to provide

feedback to court leadership on trends and concerns that affect the program and self-represented litigants.

Programs should meet regularly with the clerk's office, family support services coordinator, case management staff, and other court offices. Establishing good working relationships and informal channels of communication with court staff allows for opportunities to address issues and concerns that affect self-represented litigants. Partnerships result in better referrals between court offices. Clerks may identify and refer litigants who need legal advice, help with forms, and referral to counsel. Help center staff can identify issues that must be addressed by the court and refer self-represented litigants to the correct office or individual who can help address these issues.

Court help center staff must stay informed about court policy, procedural changes, and updates to the case management plan. Changes to these procedures will affect the advice and information given to self-represented litigants. Help center providers should have access to the court's case management system to review any court cases that may be relevant to a self-represented party seeking assistance.

Help center staff should meet regularly with other stakeholders and programs that operate in the same courthouse. Stakeholders may include child support enforcement, other legal services programs and providers, law libraries, the local bar, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) service providers, Department of Social Services, and providers of custody evaluations, supervised visits, and co-parent education classes.

Provider Type

Help centers are staffed in many ways. Maryland court-based help centers are staffed by court employees, pro bono lawyers, contract attorneys, and non-lawyer staff. There are benefits and drawbacks to each staffing method. This section will cover the three main models of providing help center assistance in Maryland:

- Contractor
- Staff
- Pro Bono

This section also addresses other concerns and issues, such as the importance of coverage, using non-attorney staff, and operating a regional program.

CONTRACTOR MODEL

This is the most commonly used method in Maryland. Many Maryland help centers are staffed by contractors, including the District Court Help Centers and the statewide remote services center.

In the Contractor model, the court enters into a contractual agreement with an individual attorney, a non-profit organization, or a law firm to staff the help center program. Each court must follow their local procurement policies and procedures. In most cases, the court prepares a Statement of Work (SOW) that outlines the expected duties and responsibilities of the contractual help provider. *See **Statement of Work – Help Center Contractor**, page 52.*

Much like a job description for an employee, the SOW includes required minimum and preferred qualifications (e.g., a J.D. from an accredited law school, a license to practice law in the State of Maryland, and required years of experience). *See **Staff Qualifications, Training and Supervision**, page 14.*

After the SOW is created, the court may need to prepare a Request for Proposal (RFP) to solicit bids for the program. The RFP should alert potential service providers that the selection process is competitive and that the evaluation and selection process will be based on objective criteria.

Once a provider is selected, the court should enter into a contractual agreement with the provider. The contract should include a statement of work that outlines the duties and responsibilities of the provider, the contract dates, and the compensation rate for the services provided. *See **Statement of Work – Help Center Contractor**, page 52.*

The contract should permit the court to monitor the program, collect data, and ensure that the program:

- Provides high-quality services;
- Does not breach the court's duty to maintain its independence and neutrality, including the requirement that services be available to all parties in a litigation;
- Does not compromise the court's appearance of neutrality; and
- Complies with all applicable Maryland Rules.

Program Spotlight: Glen Burnie Help Center – Contractor Model

The first District Court Help Center opened in Glen Burnie in 2009. A staff of three attorneys and one administrative assistant serve unrepresented litigants with civil District Court matters on a walk-in basis. Here, litigants most often seek help for housing and small claims matters. On average, this location provides 4,500 instances of service each year.



Figure 4. Supervisor Nicolle Katrivanos and Administrative Assistant Pam Flemming at the Glen Burnie District Court Help Center

Why does your program work so well?

Our goal is to provide top notch legal services in the most efficient manner possible. Our staff is committed to excellence. We function as a unit and strive to empower members of the community with the knowledge to assert and protect their legal rights.

What do you do in your court that should be replicated throughout the state?

We have built strong relationships with court staff and other providers located in our building. In our multi-service center, other programs such as the Department of Social Services, Parole and Probation, YWCA, and Job

Works frequently make referrals to us.

Likewise, the clerk's office often refers litigants who need legal advice or help selecting the correct form. We make many referrals back to these same entities.

We prioritize relationship building which has helped create a successful working environment for us and a positive impact on the litigants we serve. If we identify someone who needs rental assistance or access to a safe house, they can be referred to a provider quickly and easily. Being kind and supportive makes everyone's job a little easier. Courthouse staff go above and beyond to assist us when we need help, and we reciprocate.

What have you learned over the years in running this program?

What we do is not just a job. We assist large numbers of litigants with life altering issues including domestic violence, housing, and expungement of criminal records. Our services really impact people's lives in a major way.

If you could change one thing about your program what would it be?

It would be nice to spend more time with each litigant. We must be thorough yet efficient.

Relate something that reflects on the impact of the program.

A few days before Christmas, we assisted a family with young children that was facing eviction. The 5-year-old didn't understand why she couldn't have a Christmas tree. The family

was trying to raise funds to redeem the property, but the judgment was entered with no right of redemption. Upon review of the earlier cases upon which the judgment was entered, we discovered a tangled web of issues which supported multiple motions to vacate the prior judgments. We helped the family file

for a stay of the pending eviction and a new hearing was scheduled after Christmas. Ultimately, with the help of our program, this family was able to redeem the property, based on a finding that the amount of rent claimed in prior judgments was incorrect.

STAFF ATTORNEY MODEL

Some Judiciary help centers are staffed by court employees. The Montgomery County Family Law Help Center operates in this way. In this model, the court hires help center staff directly.

Program Spotlight: Family Law Help Center – Staff Attorney Model

The Montgomery County Family Law Help Center provides walk-in legal advice and information in family law matters. With a staff of five attorneys, two administrative aides, and volunteers, this location provides 10,000 instances of service each year.



Figure 5. Staff at the Montgomery County Family Law Help Center

Why does your program work so well?

Our staff is dedicated to fulfilling the mission of the Center. During the COVID-19 pandemic, each team member used an “all-hands-on deck” approach and did whatever was necessary to meet the current needs.

We are a team. The level of collegiality is very high, and we enjoy talking to one another and asking each other interesting legal questions which we encounter throughout the day. Each team member is comfortable asking questions, in the spirit of mutual learning and professional development.

We have a diverse workforce and a multi-lingual staff. Both administrative aides are bilingual, which is a vital asset that increases productivity at our Center. Staff diversity helps clients feel welcome and supported.

What have you learned over the years in running this program?

When confronted with a new challenge or a problem, it helps to bluntly describe the challenge to the rest of the staff, ask for feedback, and allow time for ideas to percolate before making any decisions.

Family law programs should stay connected with Family Magistrates. They decide most of the cases for the litigants we see in our Center and it helps to know how they think about certain issues.

If you could change one thing about your program what would it be?

I wish there was more time for professional development. It is important to keep up with changes in the law, and we do that. But, with the heavy flow of litigants streaming in every day, we must make extra effort to find time for training.

Relate something that reflects on the impact of the program.

Self-represented litigants demand and benefit from in-person services. When the courts limited in-person help center services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the limited timeslots filled up quickly. People are routinely early and rarely miss appointments.

PRO BONO MODEL

Some Judiciary help centers use pro bono lawyers or volunteers. If this model is used, Judiciary staff should provide program oversight including establishing program hours and case guidelines, procurement of supplies and equipment, recruitment and training protocols for volunteers and coordination with other services. Protocols should be developed to screen and train new volunteers.

Program Spotlight: Family Law Help Center – Pro Bono Model

The Circuit Court for Carroll County’s “Courthouse Family Law Advice Clinic” operates using volunteer attorneys and a family law case navigator.

The navigator helps litigants fill out forms, explains service of process, answers telephone calls, and meets with walk-in litigants. The navigator peels off some of the more routine issues, making it easier for attorneys to provide more focused legal advice.

This location is open during both day and evening hours and offers a “family law for the people” seminar each month. On average, this center assists 700 litigants each year.

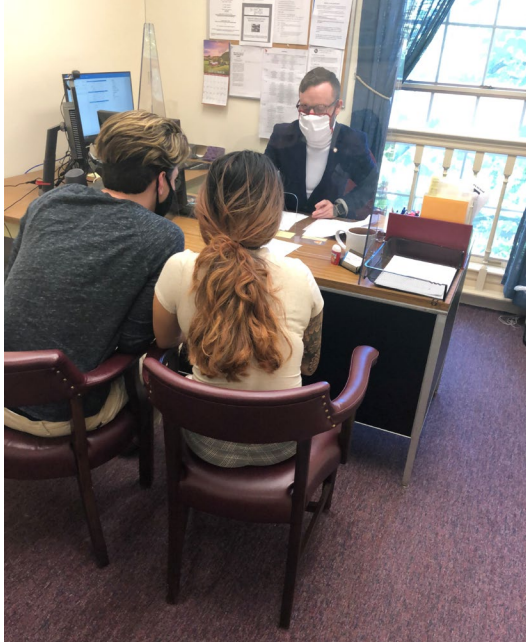


Figure 6. Case Navigator works in the Circuit Court for Carroll County during COVID-19

What makes your SHC unique?

Our navigator helps litigants fill out forms, explains why things are happening and what the next step from the court will be, supervises non-attorney guardians, and makes referrals. Because he is not a lawyer, he does not get bogged down with legal questions.

What do you do in your court that should be replicated throughout the state?

We don't just give people forms. We make sure that people can file the correct forms, are aware of what the forms mean, and that the forms are filled out completely and correctly.

What have you learned over the years in running this program?

Communication is key. No one should have to wander around looking for answers. We are aware of our limitations as court employees; however, we work to build a resource network to fill in the gaps that we cannot assist with. If presented with a novel question, we find out the answer and share it with the rest of the staff.

Relate something that reflects on the impact of the program.

We're collaborative. We each have individual specialized roles, but we draw from each other's experience. We each play a role at different points in a case, helping to ensure that nothing is overlooked.

The charts below outline benefits and drawbacks to each staffing model.

Court staff

Benefits	Drawbacks
- Consistent service provided. - Knowledgeable about court-based programs, legal services providers, private bar and more. - Moderate cost; HR functions absorbed by the organization. - Easy to train on new policies and procedures.	- Potential appearance of impropriety if court employees provide legal advice. - Non-attorney staff may not be able to provide legal advice. - May be difficult to get permanent positions. - Added cost for training, malpractice insurance, etc.

Contractor staff

Benefits	Drawbacks
▪ Consistent service provided. ▪ Knowledgeable about court-based programs, legal services providers, private bar and more. ▪ Easy to train on new policies and procedures. ▪ Responsible for own training, HR, timekeeping, malpractice insurance, etc.	▪ May be more costly than other staffing models. ▪ Procurement process can be onerous. ▪ Can be disruptive to the program if there is a new vendor.

Pro Bono volunteers

Benefits	Drawbacks
▪ Low-cost. ▪ Knowledgeable about specific case types and local court practice and procedure.	▪ May not be knowledgeable in all legal areas. ▪ Lack of consistency in services provided. ▪ May not be as knowledgeable about referrals for further help—court-based services, legal services providers, private bar. ▪ Still need staff to coordinate and oversee the program. ▪ May resist following certain policies or procedures such as data collection.

Members of the public will perceive help centers as court programs, regardless of which staffing model is used. Assistance must be high-quality and professional. Courts should designate a program manager to review program policies and procedures regularly and to oversee program operations at arm's length.

In some programs, paralegals and non-attorney staff may be used. Clerical and other support staff may be needed to maximize professional staff time, especially in larger programs. Paralegals may be more cost effective and are fully capable of providing sophisticated and adequate legal information to self-represented litigants if supervised by a licensed attorney. More complex legal issues should be referred only to attorney staff.

Clerical and support staff may:

- Maintain supplies and equipment.

- Answer phones, direct calls, and schedule appointments.
- Compile statistical data based on intake and evaluation forms.
- Provide the public with general information about the court.
- Make referrals to litigants.
- Assist the public with computer usage.
- Distribute educational materials.

Staff Qualifications, Training, and Supervision

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS

Attorney staff should:

- Be admitted to practice law in Maryland.
- Be in good standing with the Court of Appeals of Maryland; and
- Have no pending complaints before the Attorney Grievance Commission.

*See **HELP CENTER STAFFING DOCUMENTS**, page 46.*

TRAINING

New staff should be trained and oriented to program policies and procedures.

Write down important information and keep it in one place, such as a shared drive, in an electronic knowledge base, or in a binder. Update training materials at least yearly, or whenever there is a change in staffing or program policy. New staff should be given time to review written materials during training. More seasoned staff can reference written materials if issues come up.

Pair new staff with a mentor or more seasoned staff for training. New staff should spend time shadowing more experienced staff. When they feel ready, they can provide the direct service under observation. Build in time to debrief.

Encourage staff to take regular substantive and procedural training. All staff should take training on substantive and procedural topics on a regular basis. Veteran staff should be encouraged to take training regularly on more in-depth topics and keep up with changes in the law.

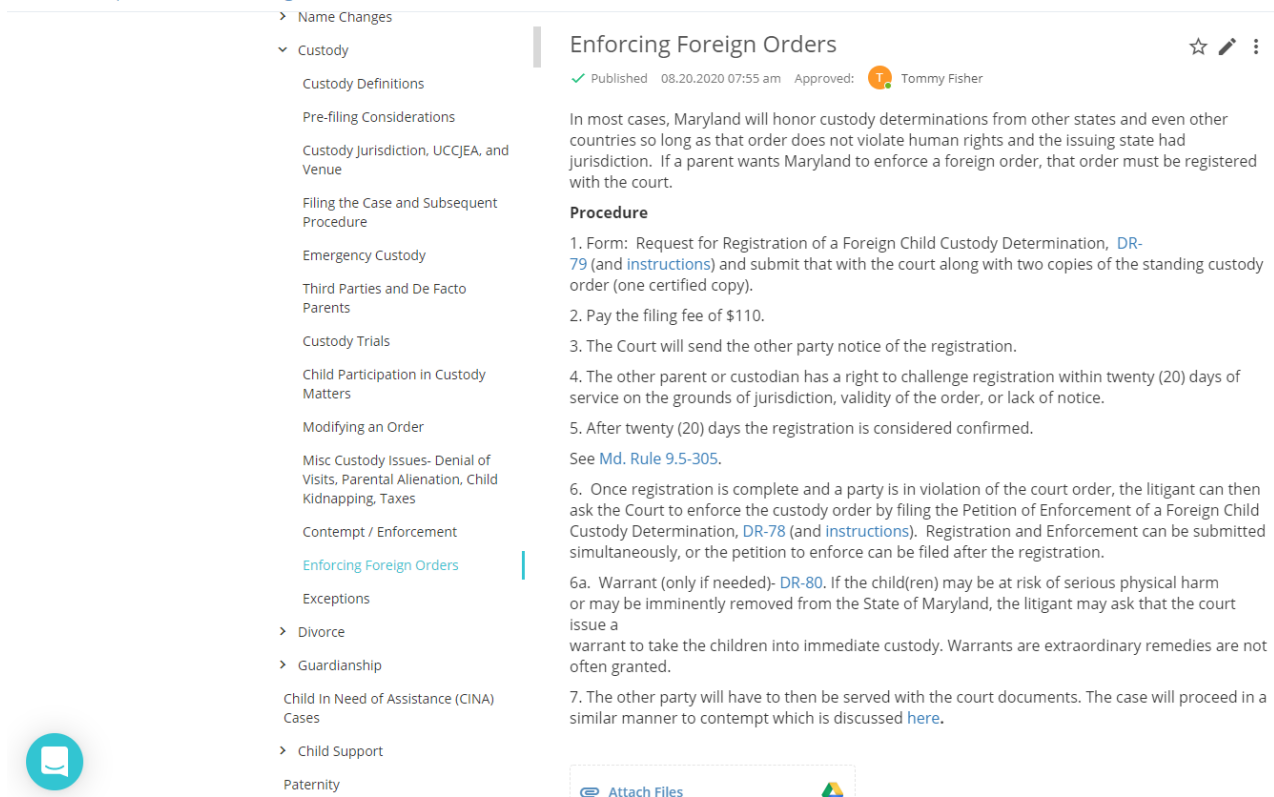
Train staff on other topics. Give staff the tools they need to assist litigants with mental health issues, limited English proficiency, substance abuse, and other challenges. Prioritize training on diversity, equity, inclusion, and bias.

Paralegal, clerical, and non-attorney staff may need special training. These staff should receive training in ethics, distinguishing legal information from legal advice, making referrals, and customer service. Litigants will have a better help center experience when front-line staff are properly trained on the type of assistance they can and cannot provide. The Judiciary offers training in these areas through the Judicial College of Maryland's Professional Development group.

The Judicial College provides many courses on assisting the public. Courses on drug and alcohol addiction, effective communication, customer service (FISH!), implicit bias, mental health, customer service, and serving challenging customers are particularly relevant to court help center staff.

Staff can obtain high quality, free training at the annual Court Help Center Provider Conference. The Court Help Center Provider Conference brings together court help center providers from throughout Maryland for educational programming, training, and networking. It is geared toward help center staff attorneys, paralegals, volunteers, and support staff. It is organized by the Maryland Judiciary's Access to Justice and Juvenile and Family Services units. Topics range from substantive legal topics, to working with litigants with limited English proficiency, referrals to court programs, problem solving on the job, and more.

The Judiciary's statewide court help center knowledge base is a helpful training tool. The help center knowledge base contains articles written by and for help center attorneys. It serves as an effective training tool, quick reference guide, and pro bono recruitment incentive. The knowledge base can be updated quickly with changes in the law, new resources, and referral sources for litigants without counsel.



> Name Changes

▼ Custody

- Custody Definitions
- Pre-filing Considerations
- Custody Jurisdiction, UCCJEA, and Venue
- Filing the Case and Subsequent Procedure
- Emergency Custody
- Third Parties and De Facto Parents
- Custody Trials
- Child Participation in Custody Matters
- Modifying an Order
- Misc Custody Issues- Denial of Visits, Parental Alienation, Child Kidnapping, Taxes
- Contempt / Enforcement
- Enforcing Foreign Orders**
- Exceptions

> Divorce

> Guardianship

Child In Need of Assistance (CINA) Cases

> Child Support

Paternity

Enforcing Foreign Orders

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In most cases, Maryland will honor custody determinations from other states and even other countries so long as that order does not violate human rights and the issuing state had jurisdiction. If a parent wants Maryland to enforce a foreign order, that order must be registered with the court.

Procedure

1. Form: Request for Registration of a Foreign Child Custody Determination, [DR-79](#) (and [instructions](#)) and submit that with the court along with two copies of the standing custody order (one certified copy).
2. Pay the filing fee of \$110.
3. The Court will send the other party notice of the registration.
4. The other parent or custodian has a right to challenge registration within twenty (20) days of service on the grounds of jurisdiction, validity of the order, or lack of notice.
5. After twenty (20) days the registration is considered confirmed.

See [Md. Rule 9.5-305](#).

6. Once registration is complete and a party is in violation of the court order, the litigant can then ask the Court to enforce the custody order by filing the Petition of Enforcement of a Foreign Child Custody Determination, [DR-78](#) (and [instructions](#)). Registration and Enforcement can be submitted simultaneously, or the petition to enforce can be filed after the registration.
- 6a. Warrant (only if needed)- [DR-80](#). If the child(ren) may be at risk of serious physical harm or may be imminently removed from the State of Maryland, the litigant may ask that the court issue a warrant to take the children into immediate custody. Warrants are extraordinary remedies are not often granted.
7. The other party will have to then be served with the court documents. The case will proceed in a similar manner to contempt which is discussed [here](#).

[Attach Files](#)

Figure 7. Court Help Center Knowledge Base

STAFFING AND SUPERVISION

Consistent staffing is important. Programs must have coverage during the times they are advertised to the public and remain open for the entire time that they are advertised to be open to the public. Litigants rely on help center staff to answer questions, help with paperwork, assist with public access computers, and accomplish other tasks.

Full-time help centers should engage at least two (2) attorneys to ensure sufficient program coverage. It is vital to have back up staffing to cover staff absences for vacation, illness, training, and for other reasons.

Program managers should use data to inform staff scheduling. Supervisors should add extra staff or volunteers to assist during peak times. Supervisors may also want to limit the number of staff who are permitted to take leave during periods of high demand.

Program hours should reflect times that staff are available, keeping in mind federal and state labor laws. Staff will need time to take care of administrative duties

such as statistical reporting, timekeeping, training, and meetings. Supervisory staff should carefully monitor leave requests to ensure there is sufficient staff to meet demand.

Programs that rely on pro bono attorneys should schedule shifts in advance and clearly communicate program policies related to unexpected absences. New volunteers should be given a thorough overview of program policies. Policies should include information about what they should do if they are unable to meet a pro bono commitment. Volunteers should also have emergency contact information for program staff to communicate last minute schedule changes or cancellations.

Each court help center should designate a program manager, managing attorney, supervisor, or lead worker. This individual will hire and train staff, establish program policies and procedures, handle scheduling for staff and volunteers, measure outcomes, and ensure the program is functioning as intended. This is a vital position, particularly if programs use non-attorney staff to deliver services.

Attorney oversight of paralegals is critical to ensure that legal information is accurate and up-to-date. Attorneys can help spot legal issues that go beyond the scope of the court-based program. Attorney oversight is necessary to develop effective case assessment protocols and to ensure program staff adhere to codes of professional conduct. This is critical for the protection of the public and the court. Cases that should be referred for attorney representation should not be overlooked because of the inability of staff to identify important legal issues.

Program Spotlight: District Court Help Center - Eastern Shore

What makes your program unique?

The District Court Help Center in Salisbury is a regional center that provides access to legal help on the Eastern Shore. Operating as a regional program, the Salisbury District Court Help Center is staffed by three attorneys and one administrative assistant who provide legal help to litigants without counsel in Wicomico and Dorchester Counties. Staff are stationed full-time in Salisbury and travel to Cambridge

weekly to provide help on Fridays, the court's civil day. On average, this Help Center assists 3,200 litigants each year.

What do you do in your court that should be duplicated throughout the state?

Help center staff maintain close relationships with the clerk's office. This partnership results in better service to the public. Clerks identify and refer litigants who need legal advice and help with forms. In turn, when help center staff

identify issues that must be addressed by the court, such as a motion that is awaiting a ruling, the clerk's office can proactively facilitate resolution. This relationship has been carefully cultivated by regular meetings, frequent trainings, and open communication. This relationship is vital to our program success and should be duplicated in all jurisdictions.



Figure 8. Administrative assistant Linda Gillis, ready to welcome litigants in Salisbury.

What have you learned over the years in running this program?

The Salisbury and Cambridge help centers operate in distinct communities, which means outreach must be tailored to meet the unique needs of these communities. Some individuals harbor mistrust of government entities, and extra efforts must be made to gain trust. When a strong rapport is established, help centers can serve litigants more effectively. Our staff give presentations at programs for seniors, at local events, and have partnered with community mediation centers. These efforts increase the number of litigants who seek help

and increase access to justice for disenfranchised populations.

If you could change one thing about your program what would it be?

On the Shore, there are few legal resources and litigants often must travel significant distances for in-person legal help. It would be great to add additional locations to better serve the entire region. Resources are scarce in family law, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One way to address these geographic and resource limitations would be to add videoconferencing kiosks in courts that do not have full time help centers. Litigants could meet face-to-face with an attorney, share documents, and receive printed materials, including forms.

Relate something that reflects on the impact of the program.

The District Court Help Center in Cambridge opened in October 2018 to provide better geographic coverage on the Eastern Shore. This Court Help Center has had a steady increase in the number of litigants served and serves a high number of individuals with limited English proficiency. Many matters are sensitive, including expungement of criminal records or peace and protective orders. Many individuals would be unable to navigate these legal processes without help. The number of clients served on the Eastern Shore through these help centers is growing, and the number of referrals from community organizations also continues to grow. This demonstrates that help centers are vital community assets.

COMPLAINTS AND PROGRAM FEEDBACK

Help centers should have a formal procedure to handle complaints. If a litigant is unhappy with the services received at a Judiciary court help center, they should be offered the opportunity to make a complaint. A formal complaint procedure will help to ensure that all complaints are handled quickly, fairly, and consistently. The process should be easy for litigants to find and understand.

Help centers should solicit feedback from users. Litigants may provide comments in-person or through online surveys. Comments from program users can help management identify issues before they become serious and can inform program improvements. Feedback can also help program management tell the story of help center's impact via annual reports and during grant reporting processes.

Scope of Service

Judiciary court help centers should provide the following services to litigants without counsel:

- Basic procedural information, legal advice, and assistance.
- Information about legal rights and consequences to help ensure self-represented litigants are fully informed before proceeding with their case.
- Confirmation of case status and scheduling information.
- Assistance selecting and completing court forms.
- Guidance with preparing for mediation, negotiations, trial, and other court events.
- Referrals to:
 - The private bar, and other forms of legal help when appropriate.
 - Legal services, including providers of domestic violence services and domestic violence legal services.
 - Court programs including ADR, day of court representation programs, and law libraries.
 - Social service organizations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.

Help centers should assist with as many civil case types as possible. Often, litigants do not know if they have a District or circuit court matter. Help centers should make it easy for litigants to get assistance with a variety of issues, particularly when there is an overlap in case types. If help centers seek to expand the types of cases with which they

assist, training and support is available from the Administrative Office of the Court's Access to Justice and Juvenile and Family Services units.

Maryland Rule 19-301 permits attorneys to ghostwrite pleadings and motions on behalf of litigants. See comment [8] to the Rule. This is appropriate when litigants clearly understand the scope of services provided and provide informed consent. If a matter is too complex for self-representation, a litigant should be referred to counsel.

Program Spotlight: Frederick Court Help Center

In Frederick, the District and circuit courts are co-located. Here, the Court Help Center assists litigants with all civil matters in both courts.

The Frederick Court Help Center is operated by two contractual providers, the Maryland Center for Legal Assistance, LLC, and a solo practitioner who provides more in-depth legal assistance with family law matters. In Frederick, litigants most often seek help with family law matters. On average, this location provides 5,600 instances of service each year.

What makes your program unique?

The Frederick Court Help Center assists litigants with all civil matters. Two providers work together to provide service that is seamless to the public. Litigants do not have to know if they have a landlord-tenant matter or a family law matter. If they come to the help center, we will assist.

In Frederick, we use the Family Law Notebook to provide a more in-depth service. This tool helps address issues that we see frequently in family law matters. For example, litigants often get overwhelmed at the prospect of going to court on their own, particularly in sensitive areas such as divorce and child custody. The

Notebook uses to-do lists, charts, and other organizational tools that help litigants make sense of their cases. Case organization also makes it easier for litigants to obtain counsel, if desired.

What do you do in your program that should be replicated throughout the state?

Enhancing the litigant's role in the process can be achieved through standardizing processes such as file organization and tracking facts and evidence, and by using to-do lists to break down complicated processes. This also facilitates referral to private lawyers who may agree to limited scope representation for hearings or a trial.

What have you learned over the years in running this program?

When litigants feel that they have received justice in their case, it usually has less to do with outcomes and more to do with how they were treated during the process. Litigants who have had an active role in their case are more likely to be satisfied with the court process. Most litigants are willing to do the work.

If you could change one thing about your program what would it be?

Like other programs, we could benefit from more resources. The demand for services is high. We assist with everything from case consults to helping litigants prepare for court hearings. Great progress has been made in developing a system to connect litigants with limited scope attorneys, but demand continues

to increase. It's like running on a treadmill. Instead of moving forward, we just move faster.

Relate something that reflects on the impact of the program.

Our program empowers people by helping them advocate for themselves. Our program helps break down a complicated process, which is critical for litigants seeking help during a crisis.

If limited help is offered, centers should clearly state program parameters.

Litigants should be able to determine quickly and easily what kind of help a center provides. Program staff should be very knowledgeable about the types of cases that they are likely to see and should be prepared to offer referrals for litigants who need more or different help.

Help centers should ensure litigants understand the scope of service by using a written agreement that outlines program parameters. Agreements should be written wherever possible, offered in multiple languages, and signed or acknowledged by the litigant. Upon request, litigants should be given a copy of the agreement. See *Ethics*, page 33.

The agreement should cover the following topics:

- Scope of representation
- Scope of legal services
- Duration of legal services
- Fees
- Declining to advise
- Conflicts of interest

Advise litigants on procedure. Beyond assistance with forms and legal advice, court help center attorneys should be prepared to assist litigants with other types of questions. Attorneys should be prepared to explain court processes from filing complaints, service of process, time for filing answers, and the types of hearings for which the litigant may be expected to appear. Help center attorneys should be familiar with the local court's Differentiated Court Management (DCM) plans. Often litigants struggle with procedural

matters such as service of process or filing an answer. Staff should be prepared to assist litigants with moving cases forward by advising on the appropriate pleadings and motions.

Staff should be familiar with local resources to make effective referrals. Staff should be familiar with a variety of resources, including programs and services for litigants who do not have a legal problem or whose issues are not yet ripe for court intervention.

- **Full Representation.** Some matters may be too complex for self-representation. Here, staff should refer a litigant to full representation. Before making a referral, staff should consider the type of case, the litigant's ability to pay private counsel, and the availability of legal services or pro bono providers in the jurisdiction. Staff may refer to:
 - A legal services provider.
 - Pro bono provider.
 - Private counsel. Staff should not refer to individual practitioners, but rather refer to a local bar association's lawyer referral service.
- **Unbundled Services.** In some areas, limited scope representation may be available. Staff should be knowledgeable about where to direct litigants who may benefit from this service.
- **Community Organizations.** Litigants may need services that can be provided by a local community organization. Examples include a social services program, mental health services, assisted living for adult disabled children, child support agency, child protective services, community mediation, and housing or cash assistance programs.
- **Domestic Violence.** Some litigants may benefit from a referral to a domestic violence shelter, court accompaniment services, or legal assistance program. Domestic violence programs may also assist with helping victims connect with economic recovery programs and mental health services.
- **Court-Based Resources.** If litigants intend to pursue self-representation, staff should be aware of Judiciary resources including tip sheets, videos, forms, legal help pages, and the Maryland Court Help app. These resources can be found at www.mdcourts.gov/courthelp.

- **Alternative Dispute Resolution.** In many situations, a referral to mediation or another ADR service may be more appropriate than filing a case. Court help center staff may prepare litigants for ADR by providing a brief overview of what to expect and contact information for an appropriate program.
- **Law Libraries.** Maryland's network of court-based law libraries provide access to legal information, forms help, and have special collections for non-lawyers.

Program Spotlight: Client Notebook Project

The Client Notebook Project helps self-represented litigants navigate complex family law cases. Documents are compiled into a notebook over time with the help of attorneys and student paralegals. Staff walk litigants through family matters step-by-step and empower them to complete tasks to assist in their own representation.

The Notebook Project aims to help litigants complete the case work on their own so they can find representation for court hearings. If a litigant does not have counsel, they will be prepared to proceed on their own with a basic understanding of how to present their case, get exhibits before the court, call witnesses, and testify on their behalf.

Litigants are interviewed by student paralegals who assist with compiling information, fact finding, and completing a conflict check. Then, litigants meet with an attorney who provides instructions, gives the litigant a to-do list, and schedules a return appointment. Referrals for additional help, like limited scope representation, trial coaching, or other services are available throughout the process.

The Client Notebook contains four parts:

One: Gather the facts of your case

- Topic of Dispute charts: Gather facts and evidence to support your case.
- Calendar and Journal: Track important events in your case.

Two: Find ways to work with a lawyer

- Legal Advice: Ways to find a lawyer, and notes from your meetings.

Three: Keeping your documents in order

- Court Papers: Copies of any paper you give the court or get from the court
- Financial Information: Financial issues in your case.

Four: The steps in a custody or divorce dispute

- Issue Checklists: A step-by-step guide to court procedure.
- Discovery Related Documents: Copies of all communication with the other side.
- Mediation and Settlement: Keeping control of the outcome by settling.
- Preparing for a hearing: How to present arguments in court.

This program partners with local attorneys who agree to accept limited scope and sliding fee scale cases. This enhances access to representation for litigants who would otherwise go without. For more information visit www.clientnotebook.com.

Accessibility

LANGUAGE ACCESS

Litigants with limited English proficiency should be provided the same level of service as native English speakers. All staff, including attorney and administrative staff, shall review the AOC's Language Access Policy, and be familiar with how to use telephonic interpretation, and how to assist litigants with requesting an interpreter for court events.

Court help centers should display the Language Line Poster (PDF) or the I Speak Card (PDF) to help visitors indicate the language in which they need assistance.



Interpretation Services Available

English Translation: Point to your language. An interpreter will be called. The interpreter is provided at no cost to you.

Arabic  عربي أشر إلى لغتك. وسوف يتم جلب مترجم فوري لك. سيتم تأمين المترجم الفوري مجاناً.	Korean  한국어 귀하께서 사용하는 언어를 지적하시면 해당 언어 통역 서비스를 무료로 제공해 드립니다.
Burmese  မြန်မာ သင့်ဘာသာစကားကို ညွှန်ပြပါ။ ကောင်းပြန် ပြောပြပါမယ်။ သင့်ဘာသာစကားကို ကောင်းပြန် ပြောပြပါမယ်။	Mandarin  國語 請指認您的語言， 以便為您提供免費的口譯服務。
Cantonese  廣東話 請指認您的語言， 以便為您提供免費的傳譯服務。	Polish  Polski Proszę wskazać swój język i wezwiemy tłumacza. Tłumacza zapewnimy bezpłatnie.
Farsi  فارسی به زبان موردنظر اشاره کنید. ما برای شما مترجم می آوریم. این کار هیچ هزینه ای برای شما نخواهد داشت.	Portuguese  Português Indique o seu idioma. Um intérprete será chamado. A interpretação é fornecida sem qualquer custo para você.
French  Français Pointez vers votre langue et on appellera un interprète qui vous sera fourni gratuitement.	Punjabi  ਪੰਜਾਬੀ ਅਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਦੱਲ ਦਿਸਾਰਾ ਕਰੋ ਅਤੇ ਇਕ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਆ ਖੁਲਾਇਆ ਜਾਵੇਗਾ। ਇਹ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਆ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਬਿਨਾ ਕਿਸੇ ਮੁਲਕ ਦੇ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਜਾਵੇਗਾ।
Haitian Creole  Kreyòl Lonje dwèt ou sou lang ou pale a epi n ap rele yon entèprèt pou ou. Nou ba ou sèvis entèprèt la gratis.	Russian  Русский Укажите язык, на котором вы говорите. Вам вызовут переводчика. Услуги переводчика предоставляются бесплатно.
Hindi  हिंदी अपनी भाषा पर इंगित करें और एक दुभाषिया बुलाया जाएगा। दुभाषिये का प्रबंध आप पर बिना किसी खर्च के किया जाता है।	Somali  Afsoomaali Farta ku fiiq luqadaada... Waxa laguugu yeeri doonaa turjubaan. Turjubaanka wax lacagi kaaga bixi mayso.
Hmong  Hmoob Taw rau koj hom lus. Yuav hu rau ib tug neeg txhais lus. Yuav muaj neeg txhais lus yam uas koj tsis tau them dab tsi.	Spanish  Español Señale su idioma y llamaremos a un intérprete. El servicio es gratuito.
Italian  Italiano Puntare sulla propria lingua. Un interprete sarà chiamato. Il servizio è gratuito.	Tagalog  Tagalog Ituro po ang inyong wika. Isang tagasalin ang ipagkakaloob nang libre sa inyo.
Japanese  日本語 あなたの話す言語を指して下さい。 無料で通訳を提供します。	Vietnamese  Tiếng Việt Hãy chỉ vào ngôn ngữ của quý vị. Một thông dịch viên sẽ được gọi đến, quý vị sẽ không phải trả tiền cho thông dịch viên.

Poster provided by Language Line Services © 2011 • 1-800-752-6096 • www.LanguageLine.com
 Over-the-phone interpretation and document translation in more than 170 languages.



Figure 9. Language Link card.

Court help centers should hire bilingual staff in jurisdictions where a significant portion of the local population speaks a language other than English. Bilingual staff shall be able to competently provide court help center services, including legal advice, in both English and their other language.

Court help center should use staff interpreter services, if available. Many courts have full-time Spanish staff interpreters who may be used in court help centers if available. Talk to your court administrator or administrative clerk about the possibility of engaging a staff interpreter.

Telephonic Interpretation. Help centers may use Language Line for on-demand telephonic interpretation of litigant meetings, whether they are in-person or on the phone. To access an interpreter:

1. Dial 1-866-874-3972.
2. Provide your Client ID: Circuit Courts - 530284; District Courts - 530277.
3. Indicate the language you need.
4. Provide the Access Code: Check with your supervisor or contact the Court Interpreter Program at 410-260-3569.

The Administrative Office of the Court's Language Services Program can help. Staff can help you obtain your access code, answer questions, and troubleshoot issues. Call 410-260-3569. For Language Line Posters and Desktop Cards, visit the Language Line Customer Resource Center at <http://www.language-line.com/customer-service/support-tools>. Materials are provided to courts at no cost.

Many court forms, brochures, and materials are available in the Judiciary's Language Portals. Many forms are available in a bilingual format in the five priority languages: Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Russian. Help center staff should be familiar with what materials are available and, with the help of an interpreter, should be able to assist non-English speakers to find and use those materials. Find them at: <https://mdcourts.gov/courtlanguage>.

The Court Interpreter Program provides written translation services. This service is available to court-based help centers. Currently, these services are limited to the translation of official court forms, signs, brochures, court instructions, and court web pages. The Court Interpreter Program uses a vendor to handle all translations.

To request a translation of a court document, fill out the [Translation Request Form](https://mdcourts.gov/sites/default/files/import/interpreter/pdfs/translationrequestcourtdocumentform.pdf) and submit it electronically along with the document. Documents must be submitted in the original electronic format, e.g. Microsoft Word not PDF. Scanned or hard copies are not accepted. Formatting specifications, turnaround schedule, and budget will be discussed upon the receipt of the completed Translation Request Form. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/sites/default/files/import/interpreter/pdfs/translationrequestcourtdocumentform.pdf>.

The Judiciary is unable to translate case-specific documents; however, help centers should provide information to litigants on how to have their documents translated for court purposes. The Court Interpreter Program recommends that parties and their attorneys hire translators accredited by the American Translator's Association (ATA) to provide official translations of foreign language documents. The directory of translators accredited by ATA can be found at: http://www.atanet.org/onlinedirectories/individuals_tabs.php.

It is also recommended that translators certify their work by attaching a statement to the translation, attesting that it is a true and correct translation of the original. Note that this certification is not required by law but may be requested by parties in the case.

Sample Statement:

I, _____, certified by the (state name) Administrative Office of the Courts for Spanish- English court interpreting and accredited (certified) by the American Translators Association for Spanish-English translation, do hereby declare that the attached birth certificate, identified with serial number _____, is a true and correct translation of the Spanish original.

LITIGANTS WITH DISABILITIES

Courts are required by law to serve all persons regardless of ability, and to provide accommodations when necessary to ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities. As a program of the Maryland Judiciary, all court help centers are held to those same standards. For a summary of Maryland state and federal laws on accessibility and how those laws apply to the courts, visit:

<https://mdcourts.gov/sites/default/files/import/legalhelp/pdfs/accessibility/18laws.pdf>.

Help center staff should be familiar with best practices in serving persons with disabilities. Use the [Court Accessibility Toolkit](#) for tips, instructions, legal background information, signage, posters, and a range of resources to help your program better serve all Marylanders. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit/courtroom>.

Help centers should use signs to let visitors know about the types of accommodations they can request. See the [Entrance Section](#) of the Court Accessibility Toolkit for sample signs you may want to use. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit>.

Be sure your program's website is accessible to persons with limited vision or blindness. See [Tips: Making Your Court Website Accessible](#) in the Court Accessibility Toolkit. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit>.

Program visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing may benefit from having access to an ASL interpreter on demand. Remote ASL Services are provided free-of-charge to help centers. These services are provided by Access to Justice through a state contract with an ASL service provider. Find information on how to request or setup a laptop for use with video remote ASL services, or how to use those services in the [Court Offices](#) section of the Court Accessibility Toolkit. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit>.

Be sure staff can help persons with disabilities use public access computers. Persons with disabilities often visit help centers to use public access computers. Staff should know how to adjust the video, audio, or navigation controls if someone needs an accommodation to use the public computer in the help center. The Court Accessibility Toolkit also includes tips on [Helping Person with Disabilities Use Public Access Computers](#). Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit>.

Staff should know how to assist a help center visitor to request an accommodation from the court. Information for the public about accommodations is available on the [Accommodations](#) page of the Judiciary website. Visit: <https://mdcourts.gov/accessibility/toolkit>.

Facilities and Security

SPACE

Court help centers should occupy a permanent space in the courthouse. The location should be easy to find and close to other offices, such as the clerk's office or law library. The space should permit security to respond easily in the event of an emergency. Help centers should have:

- An area for litigants to sign in, answer questionnaires, and wait for services.
- A separate meeting area where staff may meet with litigants. The meeting space should be private and maintained with the necessary equipment, supplies, and technology to function as an office.

If ideal space is not available, programs may need to improvise. Perhaps litigants must check-in at a central entry point of the building or wait in an area away from where they will meet with attorney staff. Here, staff may use technology, such as text message alerts, to notify litigants when it is their turn to meet with court help center staff. In some jurisdictions, public libraries, community centers, and other public spaces located outside of the court building may be used.

Consider litigant privacy. Remember that litigants may need to disclose sensitive information that pertains to their legal problem. If the interview space is right next to the waiting area, sound barriers or white noise machines may be necessary to keep discussions private. Blinds or privacy screens may shield litigants from public view.

Staff should be sure litigants gather all documents that they brought with them or provided during the interview before they leave. Items that are inadvertently left behind should be placed in a secured location until the litigant can be contacted to retrieve them.

FURNISHINGS

Help centers should be accessible, comfortable, and safe. All help centers should be furnished with:

- Offices or cubicles for staff to meet with litigants
- Desks or tables
- Staff and litigant chairs
- Storage for office supplies, agreements, and personal items

- Bookshelves for code and Rules books
- Brochure racks

Furnishing should be made of solid materials such as plastic, wood, metal or stone, so they can be easily cleaned and disinfected. Avoid cloth material or expensive finished wood. Hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes should be placed through the entire court help center with no-touch dispensers.

Use the waiting areas to educate litigants on substantive and procedural processes, court programs, and other relevant information. Use brochure racks to display flyers about local services, court resources and process, and other programs. Consider adding a CourtTV to play informational content about court programs and services. To request installation of a CourtTV, contact Access to Justice at 410-260-3447.

Offer small toys, coloring books, crayons or books for litigants who arrive with small children. Activities may help keep them occupied while they wait. Items should be easily disinfected after use or given to children to take with them.

TECHNOLOGY, SUPPLIES, AND EQUIPMENT

All help centers should have the following technology:

- Public access computer or tablet for intake and data collection
- Staff computer and printer
- Public Wi-Fi
- Copier
- Scanner
- Telephone
- Web camera
- External speakers
- Headset with microphone for staff

Public access devices permit litigants to sign in when they arrive. Most programs require collection of statistical information, such as demographic data, case type, or procedural information when litigants arrive. These questionnaires can be completed on electronic devices, reducing the burden of data entry by staff.

The Judiciary's Judicial Information Systems (JIS) division may need to issue special credentials for public access devices. Consult with JIS before purchasing any

equipment. In-person staff may be needed to log into devices at the beginning of each day and to assist members of the public with using this equipment. If your help center is off-site, consider what equipment will be needed and how it will be maintained.

Supply needs may vary by location, but should include, at a minimum:

- Trash cans
- Office supplies including paper, pens, notebooks, highlighters, calculators, staplers, and scissors.
- Cleaning supplies including hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and spray cleaners.
- Tissues

SECURITY

Security is an important consideration for court-based help centers. Litigants may be upset and emotional when addressing sensitive legal matters, and situations may become volatile very quickly.

Maintain privacy. A private office space may protect a litigant from being seen by an abusive partner or a friend, family member, or coworker.

Ensure information entered into electronic devices is safe and secure. Make sure forms do not store information and that other data is wiped from public access computers regularly.

Court help center visitors should undergo security screening prior to entering the help center. Litigants using a center inside a courthouse should be screened by security upon entering the building. If your center has a separate entrance, establish a security check point for litigants prior to meeting with staff.

Arrange furniture so staff have easy and unobstructed entry and egress. Provide panic buttons where staff meet one-on-one with members of the public during an interview. Panic buttons should be directly connected to building security.

Consider video surveillance which would permit building security to monitor the help center and respond quickly if needed. Equipment and funding can be sought from the Judiciary's Office of Security Administration. Audio surveillance is not permitted.

Consider court help center hours and location. Arrange for security if programs operate after normal court hours. Some jurisdictions operate multiple after-hours programs simultaneously to reduce security costs.

If a court help center is located off-site, consider privacy, spacing, and security.

Public facilities such as a library or community center may have the space and the technology needed to provide separate waiting and meeting space with a Wi-Fi connection. Consider keeping equipment, forms, and other necessities for a mobile clinic on a cart that can be securely stored at the facility or easily transported. Find out if the building already has security cameras and personnel to add an extra layer of protection for litigants and attorneys.

Train staff on how to handle emergency situations and de-escalate volatile situations. Conduct regular fire, active shooter, and other emergency drills. Be sure all staff know how to operate doors, panic buttons, and how to contact building security. Establish a meeting place for staff in the event of an emergency. Keep this information in a written policy that is accessible to all staff. Review and revise procedures as needed.

Train staff on how to deal with difficult clients and individuals in crisis. Educate staff on how to recognize red flags or warning signs, and simple self-defense.

Make sure staff comply with local and statewide training initiatives. Staff with active Judiciary Windows accounts on the JIS network must complete quarterly security trainings. This initiative is part of the Judicial Council's Court Technology Committee's security education and awareness training program. Failure to complete the assigned training during the assignment period will result in a loss of access to non-court related internet websites until the assignment has been completed.

CONTINUITY PLANNING AND PROGRAM CLOSURES

Programs must be prepared to continue operations in the event of an emergency.

Emergencies may be short-term and last for only a few minutes or hours. Others may last for weeks, months or even years. Emergencies range from natural disasters to inclement weather, security threats, and public health emergencies. There are many crises that can affect help center operations and each scenario should be considered.

Consult with court leadership to determine if court help center operations are mission critical. Determine how local leadership would like your help center to operate in the event of an emergency.

After consulting with leadership, make a plan. Outline:

- **Staffing.** Designate essential staff and establish an order of succession. If the emergency continues long-term, who should be prepared to work off-site?
- **Facilities.** Identify alternate facilities that permit continuation of operations if the courthouse or help center location are inaccessible. Can staff operate remotely? What supplies and materials will be needed to continue operations off-site?
- **Communication.** How will staff communicate with court personnel and members of the public?
 - **Internal Communications.** How will staff communicate? Will email, text, or telephone work best? Do staff have the ability to check work email during off hours? Does your location use an emergency notification system? Are all staff signed up to receive these notifications?
 - **External Communications.** How will members of the public be notified if programs or services are unavailable? What about changes in program hours, location, or service delivery method?
- **Equipment.** Do staff have equipment such as laptops, web cameras and headsets that permit offsite work? Do they have reliable internet access?
- **Records.** Are records digitized? Can they be accessed offsite? What about data security?

If there are short-term service interruptions, help centers should refer litigants to the statewide remote services center.

If inclement weather prevents a help center from opening, plans should be in place to notify court staff, justice partners and members of the public. It may also be necessary to communicate closure information with staff or pro bono staff. Consider using electronic communication such as a website or social media for this purpose.

Ethics

ETHICAL RULES

Members of the public will perceive the court as being accountable for the operations of the court help center. Services must be high quality and neutral. Staff should conduct themselves in a manner that is ethically and professionally appropriate.

Help center staff should carefully review the ethical rules that apply to help center programs. The Maryland Attorneys' Rules of Professional Conduct govern attorney conduct in Maryland. They can be found in Volume II, Title 19, Chapter 300 of the Maryland Rules. The Preamble sets forth the scope and purpose of these rules.

WAIVERS AND INFORMED CONSENT

Court help centers should create, update, and maintain a waiver or informed consent document that is used for each litigant assisted. This document should be reviewed and signed by each litigant as a precondition for service. If requested, litigants should be given a paper or electronic copy of this document. *See SAMPLE AGREEMENTS FOR SELF-HELP ASSISTANCE, page 62.*

Documents written for the public should be written in plain language and avoid using unnecessary legal jargon. Staff should be trained to assist litigants with limited literacy or limited English proficiency.

Documents should be presented in an easy to read, large size font. Printed materials should use a 14 to 18-point size. Sans serif fonts are easier to read than those with serifs. If presented on a computer, the font size should be large. *See Accessibility, page 24.*

Waivers or informed consent documents should be translated into multiple languages. At a minimum, these documents should be available in both English and Spanish. Staff should consider translating into languages that are common in the community.

Waivers should address the following topics:

- **Conflicts of Interest.** Litigants should understand if centers check for conflicts of interest and, if not, what will happen if the attorney has assisted another party to the case.

- **Scope of Representation.** Litigants should understand that court help center staff will not represent them in court and will not assist beyond the consultation.
- **Scope of Legal Services.** Litigants should understand that court help centers may not assist individuals who are already represented, or third parties. Litigants should understand that attorneys may decline to assist if the matter is too complex for self-representation.
- **Fees and Costs.** Litigants should understand that while help center services are free, there may be court costs that they must pay.
- **Other.** Consider including a statement that advises litigants that they must agree to provide certain data. It also may be helpful to include statements about declining to advise businesses or third parties. Some court help centers ask litigants to agree to be truthful and responsive to questions asked by attorney staff. Finally, some explicitly state that attorneys may decline to advise if prohibited by the Maryland Rules of Professional Conduct.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Rule 19-306.5 governs conflicts of interest when meeting with clients in a nonprofit and court-annexed limited legal services program setting. Court help center attorneys are not required to check for conflicts of interest under the Maryland Rules. Some court help centers create and maintain a conflicts database, but this is not typical of most court help centers.

If an attorney has a known conflict, they should decline to assist. Rule 19-306.5 is *not* a blanket exemption of the duty to avoid conflicts of interest. If an attorney knows there is a conflict, they are still bound by Rules 19-301.7 and 19-301.9. For example, if an attorney meets with Father on Tuesday in a custody case, and then Mother comes that Friday for a consultation in that same case, the attorney should reasonably be expected to know that there is a conflict of interest. This would prevent the attorney from assisting Mother.

Court help centers that rely on pro bono volunteers should be familiar with Rule 19.306.5. This provision states that Rule 19-301.10 does *not* apply unless a volunteer attorney has actual knowledge that a lawyer within her firm represents the opposing party. This Rule may help with recruiting private bar volunteers.

Court help centers should use a written waiver or agreement that clearly conveys the scope of services that is easy for people to understand. *See Waivers and Informed Consent above, and Agreement for Limited Legal Assistance – Sample 1, page 62.*

CONFIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS

Court help center attorneys should communicate the consequences of permitting a third party to be present during an attorney-client meeting. Court help center attorneys form a limited attorney-client relationship when they meet with a litigant during a help center consultation. Litigants are protected by the attorney's duty of confidentiality as well as attorney-client privilege. While a litigant may wish to be accompanied by someone who is not a party to their case, this may waive the privilege, and negatively impact the litigant. For this reason, many court help centers prohibit third parties from joining litigants during a consultation unless the litigant cannot effectively participate in the consultation without the assistance of the third party, or if the third party is a minor. In this instance, most centers require the litigant to sign a waiver acknowledging understanding of the consequences.

SOLICITATION OF BUSINESS AND REFERRALS

Attorneys should not solicit business from litigants that they assist in a court-based help center. If litigants need a referral to counsel, they should be referred to the jurisdiction's bar association. If there is no local bar association, a referral to the Lawyer Referral Service of the Maryland State Bar Association (MSBA) is recommended.

Referrals should not be made to a specific attorney. Litigants should be directed to the local bar association's lawyer referral service, or to the MSBA.

RESPECT, PATIENCE, BIAS, PREJUDICE

Help center staff must be professional and respectful to all litigants regardless of race, color, income, sexual orientation, gender identity, or ability. Court-based help centers assist all members of the public. Staff should be prepared to assist a wide range of individuals with a variety of educational, medical, religious, political, and philosophical backgrounds. Litigants may have literacy issues, lack English proficiency, or face other challenges. Many litigants who visit a court help center lack the financial means to hire a lawyer.

Litigants are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. Litigants come to court help centers under a great deal of stress. They often face emotional, financial, and physical distress related to their situation.

Staff should be trained to diffuse difficult situations. Litigants may project anger they are feeling towards their legal situation onto help center staff. While staff need not absorb abuse, they should be trained to expect projection and not take it personally. If a meeting would not be effective given the litigant's current state, attorney and non-attorney staff should direct the client to return at a later time or to contact the statewide remote services center when the litigant is ready to move forward productively.

Staff should be trained to recognize bias and prejudice. If bias is left unchecked, it can result in unequal access to justice. Examples of bias are:

- Spending more time with or doing more work for certain clients as opposed to others because they are more like themselves.
- Treating someone with limited education or ability more critically than they would treat another person.
- Avoiding persons with special needs such as a disability or language access to avoid the extra work that may be involved.

Help center supervisors should:

- Provide training opportunities on respect, patience, bias, and prejudice, and encourage staff to participate.
- Monitor staff to ensure they are not treating litigants differently based on race, gender, age, income, disability, education, national origin, orientation, identity, or other factors.

GIFTS AND PAYMENTS

Help center staff should not accept gifts from litigants. Staff may encourage litigants to express gratitude by writing a letter about their experience, performing a good deed for someone else, or making a donation to the litigant's favorite charity. Some court help centers use a form to encourage feedback. See **HELP CENTER FEEDBACK FORM**, page 66.

Help center staff should not accept payment of any kind. Cash, checks, gift cards and the like should not be accepted. Staff should be trained to notify a supervisor who should attempt to return the payment to the litigant.

MALPRACTICE INSURANCE

Attorneys who provide legal advice should be covered by malpractice insurance.

Contractual providers should be required by contract to carry malpractice insurance. Staff attorneys should likewise carry malpractice insurance. If programs rely on pro bono volunteers, many umbrella organizations provide malpractice insurance.

Data Collection, Reporting, and Program Evaluation

Data collection is vital to help center program management and success. Collecting data on a court help center's activities is an important part of making sure the program is operating as it should. Data may also be used to demonstrate program impact to court leadership, external stakeholders, and funders.

DATA COLLECTION

Most court help centers collect data from litigants and staff. Data points may include:

- Litigant demographic data
- Average engagement length and wait times
- Case type
- Party type
- Procedural posture of the case
- Referrals made

Data collection processes should be reviewed regularly. Review data collection processes when quarterly or annual reports are due. Solicit feedback from staff and litigants. Do not collect data that is not being used for a specific reason.

Care should be taken to make sure questions are phrased appropriately. Vague terms should be avoided. Definitions are helpful. When asking sensitive questions, such as age, race, or income, be sure phrasing is neutral and respectful, and the reason for asking should be made clear.

Check font, type size and readability to ensure litigants of all abilities can understand and respond to questions. Make support staff available to assist litigants who need help. See *Accessibility*, page 24.

Court help centers should collect data in real-time. Many Maryland help centers already do this. Litigants answer a series of questions via web survey prior to meeting with help center staff, and staff are trained to enter data about each consultation electronically immediately after each consultation.

There are many benefits to collecting real-time data. Access to instant data allows programs to make changes more quickly. For example, if wait times are increasing, management can add a position and fill it quicker than if they waited to analyze data weeks or months later. Language data can also inform how programs are run. For example, if the number of litigants who speak Haitian Creole is increasing, a program can hire a bilingual attorney, train staff on how to work with interpreters, and translate program materials into Haitian Creole. Access to real-time data also allows programs to be responsive to requests from stakeholders and funders about the number and type of litigant served.

Collecting data electronically via a web-based survey may benefit litigants with limited English proficiency. When a litigant identifies their preferred language, surveys can be programmed to populate in that language. Staff should be trained to assist litigants with limited literacy. See *Accessibility*, page 24.

2. ¿En qué idioma prefiere hablar usted?

Español - Spanish

3. Por favor ingrese su primer nombre y la inicial de su apellido. **Obligatorio**

4. ¿Cuál es su código postal? **Obligatorio**

5. ¿Por qué esta aquí hoy y que quisiera hacer? **Obligatorio**

- ☐ Quiero iniciar un caso judicial.
- ☐ Recibí documentos que me dicen que vaya al tribunal y necesito ayuda.
- ☐ Quiero presentar documentos judiciales que ya están preparados.
- ☐ Tengo preguntas.
- ☐ Otro (por favor especifique)

6. Necesito ayuda con **Obligatorio**

- ☐ Necesito ayuda con el propietario
- ☐ Necesito ayuda con mi inquilino
- ☐ Alguien dice que les debo dinero
- ☐ Alguien me debe dinero
- ☐ Necesito protección de alguien
- ☐ Recibí documentos donde alegan que le hice daño a alguien y que buscan protección
- ☐ Necesito ayuda con eliminación de antecedentes penales
- ☐ Necesito ayuda con el divorcio, la custodia, la manutención de niños o las visitas
- ☐ Mi problema no está en esta lista
- ☐ Otro (por favor especifique)

7. ¿Quiere ayuda para conseguir un abogado? **Obligatorio**

--

8. ¿Está interesado en la mediación? Si es así, un miembro del personal del centro de autoayuda puede referirlo a un mediador que puede programar una cita. **Obligatorio**

Figure 10. Litigant Survey - Spanish

Staff should be trained on data collection and reporting. This will help to ensure responses are accurate and reliable.

Personal identifying information such as names or email addresses may be collected for check-in or scheduling purposes, but should be kept separately and not be linked to the individual's demographic data. Centers that do not check for conflicts should not retain any personally identifying information from litigants. Be sure that data collected or stored does not violate any ethical rules. See *Ethics*, page 33.

Court help centers should stay up to date on the latest technology and data collection best practices. Automate data collection by using web-based data collection tools. This can save time and reduce errors. Think about the data that is collected, how it is used, and what data may be needed to tell the story about the program. Do not collect

data that is not used. Consult with other court help centers to determine what data they are collecting. Consistent data can help with program evaluation.

Carefully store data and back up regularly. Be prepared in case of system failure or data corruption.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Wherever possible, collect data electronically. Using paper requires data entry at a later time. This can delay reporting, create more work for staff, and increases the likelihood of errors. Electronic data collection helps maintain accuracy and integrity of the information collected.

Offer public access computers or tablets to collect data. Device settings should be configured to automatically erase or reset after each use.

There are many free and low-cost data collection tools that can be used to track program data. Data collection tools are increasingly affordable and accessible. This has provided centers with the opportunity to modernize and streamline data collection. Real time data reporting increases program efficiency.

Maryland court help centers use a variety of tools to collect data. The costs vary depending on the number of licenses required and other features. Some tools offer online scheduling which permit litigants to select a date and time that works for them. Others include appointment reminders and text alerts.

Many court help centers use Survey Monkey, a cloud-based resource that enables users to create surveys online. Litigants can complete intake surveys on a tablet, computer, or from their own device. The Administrative Office of the Court's Juvenile and Family Services program offers this resource for court help centers at no cost. Survey Monkey also provides limited data analysis.

The Maryland Center for Legal Assistance, LLC (MCLA), which operates many Judiciary court help centers, uses a custom-built app to manage data collection on both the litigant and attorney side. Litigants initiate the process by completing a survey which asks about the type of assistance needed, the procedural posture of the case, and other data points. Demographic questions can be scheduled to auto-populate during certain periods of the year. The first question asks what language the litigant prefers to

communicate in and automatically populates the rest of the survey in that language. When litigants complete the intake survey, an attorney checks the matter out from the app’s “lobby” and enters additional details about the consultation, including the nature of the legal problem, procedural posture of the case and case county. Each survey is counted to determine how many instances of services each center provides, and a timer automatically tracks wait times, and each engagement length.

DATA REPORTING

Data should be reported to stakeholders regularly. Some court help centers may be required to report data to funders or court leadership quarterly. Others may report on a monthly basis. Some courts publish annual reports in which help center data should be included. Reports should include data points that are relevant to readers, such as the case type in which litigants seek assistance, increases or decreases in demand, and any significant changes to data collected.

Management should review data regularly. Management data including wait times, number of staff, and average engagement length are important metrics by which staff performance can be measured.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Program evaluation should occur regularly. Staff should collect and review user satisfaction data, and interview help center staff and court employees to determine if adjustments should be made to programs.

Communication, Marketing, Advertising, and Outreach

Court help centers are a vital resource that help promote access to justice in Maryland. Despite the large numbers of litigants who use court help centers each year, many more individuals are not aware that these programs exist. Court help centers should do regular outreach to ensure justice partners are aware of local programs. Justice partners include local police and sheriff’s offices, legal and social services organizations, and other entities such as 211. Care should be taken to promote programs to individuals who are underserved or face barriers to service.

WEBSITES

A web presence is vital to communicate important program details to members of the public. Most individuals obtain information about programs and services online. Many jurisdictions have court websites that are run locally, or they use the mdcourts.gov platform.

Web content should be clear, simple, easy to understand, and accessible. Content should clearly define the services provided, hours of operation, location information, and other pertinent program details. If images are used, they should represent the people served in a positive way.

Many individuals access web content via a smartphone rather than a desktop PC. Be sure online content is formatted for mobile devices.

Web content should be tagged and formatted for use by screen readers. See *LITIGANTS WITH DISABILITIES*, page 26.

Webpages should be reviewed at least bi-annually to ensure program details are up-to-date.

PRINTED MATERIALS

Printed materials such as flyers help promote programs and give litigants something tangible that they can take with them and refer to later. Flyers are low-cost, easy to develop, and easy to edit.

Flyers should be clear, simple, and easy to read. Program features like “free” should be highlighted. Printed materials should be translated into languages other than English. See *LANGUAGE ACCESS*, page 24.

Distribute flyers to justice partners regularly. Create a calendar with reminders to prompt staff to complete this important task. Create a mailing list with stakeholders including local officials, social services organizations, state agencies such as the Motor Vehicle Administration, police and sheriff’s departments, religious organizations, nonprofit legal services providers, mediation providers, and others.

Printed materials should contain the date of publication. This will help ensure program information is kept up to date.



Talk with a lawyer at a Maryland Court Help Center.

Get help with civil matters if you do not have a lawyer. Locations are listed on the back.

Get help with:

- Understanding court documents
- Preparing for court hearings
- Completing court forms
- Preparing for mediation
- Deciding what to do next
- Finding a lawyer



Get help by phone or online.

mdcourts.gov/helpcenter
410-260-1392

Who can we help?

An individual with a civil legal problem.
This service is provided to help you represent yourself.



Figure 11. Maryland Court Help Center Flyer

Use CourtTV monitors to promote court help center services. Talk with local court leadership for permission to set up a CourtTV. For support, contact the Administrative Office of the Court's Access to Justice program.

Press releases and op eds can be used to promote local programs. Program enhancements such expanded hours or case types, or a milestone like 10 years of operation are good hooks that may generate interest from local news outlets. Programs should be sure to coordinate media efforts with local leadership and the Administrative Office of the Court's Office of Government Relations and Public Affairs.

Use court referral pads to refer litigants to help centers. When leaving the courtroom, a litigant may not understand why their case was dismissed, how to collect on a judgment that they just won, or how to gain access to their children when an order is issued. Written instructions help litigants understand next steps and remember where they need to go for help. Writing down next steps may help litigants obtain better results when they arrive at a court help center or law library for assistance. For customizable referral pads, visit:

<https://mdcourts.gov/sites/default/files/import/accesstojustice/pdfs/referralpad.pdf>.

Get Help

☐ Finding a lawyer

☐ Serving a party

☐ Filing

- ☐ Amended complaint
- ☐ New case
- ☐ Motion _____

☐ Preparing for

- ☐ Pretrial Conference
- ☐ Hearing _____
- ☐ Trial
- ☐ Mediation

☐ Post Judgment

- ☐ Enforcement
- ☐ Appeal

☐ Other _____

Kind of Case _____

Case Number _____

**Talk to a lawyer for free at a
Maryland Court Self-Help Center**

Walk-In Family Law
Family Law help available in most circuit court locations.

Walk-In District Court

Baltimore - 501 E. Fayette Street, M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Cambridge - 310 Gay Street, Friday, 8:30 a.m. - noon; 1:00 - 4:30 p.m.
Frederick - 100 W. Patrick Street, M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Glen Burnie - 7500 Gov. Ritchie Highway, M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Hagerstown - 36 West Antietam Street, Monday, 8:30 - 11:30 a.m.; 12:30 - 4:30 p.m.
Salisbury - 201 Baptist Street, M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Upper Marlboro - 14735 Main Street, M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Remote Services - All Civil M-F, 8:30 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Call: 410-260-1392; Chat: mdcourts.gov/selfhelp

Visit a Law Library
In person: mdcourts.gov/ccll
Online: peoples-law.org



mdcourts.gov/selfhelp

2/4/2020

Figure 12. Maryland Court Help Referral Pad

PAID MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

The Judiciary coordinates statewide paid advertising efforts through the Administrative Office of the Court's Access to Justice program. Each year, Access to Justice promotes Maryland court help centers through a variety of channels including radio, transit advertisements, social media, and local print and online publications.

OUTREACH AND PARTNERSHIPS

Working with partners boosts help center program's profile and visibility and can help spread the word about programs. Meet regularly with on-site court staff, justice partners, local legislators, government programs, local law enforcement, and others. Individuals frequently contact these trusted officials for help with civil legal problems.

Attend meetings with groups that provide similar services. Share program information and stay in touch. Groups such as local bar associations, non-profit organizations, churches, and affinity groups are places where litigants turn for trusted help.

When staff turns over, be sure to re-introduce your program to new personnel. Offer brief training or informational sessions about programs regularly. Bring flyers, and other promotional materials.

Appendix

HELP CENTER STAFFING DOCUMENTS

Job Description – Supervising Attorney

This position performs a variety of legal and administrative duties under the supervision of _____. Employee must have a thorough knowledge of Maryland Family Law and Rules of Procedure, federal law as it applies to family matters, uniform interstate laws, local Family Division services, policies and procedures, as well as resources and referrals for self-represented litigants and persons of limited means.

Employee will develop and maintain a thorough knowledge of court policies and procedures and must make decisions consistent with these policies and procedures in assisting members of the public. Information obtained in the course of the performance of these duties may be confidential or private in nature. Employee must recognize that help center visitors may be under significant stress and ensure that they are treated with dignity and discretion as they obtain court services.

This position reports to _____. This position is *at-will* and serves at the discretion of the Administrative Judge. Employee or Court may terminate employment at any time, with or without cause. The *at-will* relationship remains in full force and effect notwithstanding any statements to the contrary made by court personnel or set forth in the any documents, including _____ County Personnel Regulations.

EXAMPLES OF ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

Employee must be able to perform each essential duty satisfactorily. The requirements listed below are representative of the knowledge, skill and/or ability required. This job description shall not be construed to describe an exhaustive list of all duties that may be performed by such a person. Reasonable accommodations will be made in accordance with the applicable law to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions.

- Provide legal advice, legal counseling, or general legal information to self-represented litigants and petitioners regarding divorce, separation, annulment,

custody, visitation, child support, alimony, marital property, domestic violence, and guardianships, as well as procedural rules.

- Apply Rules of Professional Conduct, including confidentiality, privilege, and conflict of interest rules at all times in the provision of limited legal services to self-represented litigants.
- Assist litigants with the preparation and filing of Domestic Relations Forms approved for use in the Family Division and other pleadings.
- Provide referrals for other services or organizations, as well as other sources of legal assistance, such as the _____ County Bar Association Pro Bono Program, Lawyer Referral Service, Legal Aid, as well as internet resources that may assist self-represented litigants.
- Identify domestic violence or child abuse and neglect issues and make referrals where appropriate.
- Review individual intake instruments to determine eligibility, including financial, for services.
- Inform self-represented litigants as to proper courtroom etiquette, what to expect in court, and the flow of their case through the system.
- Provide information to applicants regarding emergency or ex-parte proceedings.
- Communicate effectively with clients from diverse economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds who may be in crisis or under stress.
- Collaborate with colleagues and other court staff to provide a high level of customer service to Help Center clients and to the general public.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

- Ability to work the full-time standard work schedule of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Monday through Friday) with flexibility to accommodate early or late meetings.
- Maintain a regular, punctual, and reliable level of attendance.
- Ability to work independently in accordance with the Rules of Professional Conduct and established procedures and policies.
- Possess high level interpersonal skills to handle sensitive and confidential situations.
- Ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, including drafting of legal complaints, motions, and related documents.

- Ability to exercise a high degree of judgment, tact, diplomacy, and competence in dealing with judges, attorneys, court personnel, and the public.
- Fluency in Spanish, including legal terminology, strongly desired.
- Develop and maintain a thorough understanding of Help Center procedures and policies.
- Ability to handle multiple tasks while at all times maintaining a professional demeanor when interacting with court personnel and the public.
- Ability to make decisions based on experience, good judgment, and established policies and procedures.
- Ability to pay attention to detail in composing, typing, and proofing materials; set priorities and simultaneously process multiple duties and responsibilities.
- Ability to develop and maintain collaborative and professional working relationships with court personnel and the public.

MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS

- Admitted to the practice of law in the State of Maryland with at least two years' experience in the practice of Family Law in Maryland.
- Thorough knowledge of Maryland Family Law and Rules of Procedure, federal law as it applies to family matters, uniform interstate laws, local Family Division services, policies and procedures, as well as resources and referrals for self-represented litigants and indigent persons.
- Excellent organizational skills and customer service are of the highest priority as well as competence and temperament to communicate with the legal community, court personnel, and the general public in a fast-paced environment.
- Excellent communication skills, an even temperament, and culturally competent interpersonal skills are high priority considerations for this position.
- Knowledge of Microsoft Office Suite.
- Superior writing skills and command of English are essential.
- Fluency in Spanish preferred.

Job Description - Staff Attorney

This position performs a variety of legal and administrative duties under the supervision of _____. Employee must have a thorough knowledge of Maryland Family Law and Rules of Procedure, federal law as it applies to family matters, uniform interstate laws, local Family Division services, policies and procedures, and resources and referrals for self-represented litigants and litigants of limited means.

Employee will develop and maintain a thorough knowledge of court policies and procedures and must make decisions consistent with these policies and procedures in assisting members of the public. Information obtained in the course of the performance of these duties may be confidential or private in nature. Employee must recognize that help center visitors may be under significant stress and ensure that they are treated with dignity and discretion as they obtain court services.

Employee reports to _____.

EXAMPLES OF ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

Employee must be able to perform each essential duty satisfactorily. The requirements listed below are representative of the knowledge, skill and/or ability required.

Reasonable accommodations may be made to enable individuals with disabilities to perform the essential functions.

- Provide advice, legal counseling, or general legal information to pro se litigants and applicants regarding divorce, separation, annulment, custody, visitation, child support, alimony, marital property, and domestic violence, as well as procedural rules and practices.
- Assist litigants with the preparation and filing of Pro Se Domestic Relations Forms, and other pleadings that have been approved for use in the Family Division.
- Provide referrals for other services or organizations, as well as other sources of legal assistance, such as the _____ County Bar Association Pro Bono Program, Lawyer Referral Service, Legal Aid, as well as Internet websites designed to assist self-represented litigants.
- Identify domestic violence or child abuse and neglect issues and make referrals where appropriate.
- Review individual intakes to determine eligibility, including financial, for services.

- Educate pro se litigants about proper courtroom etiquette, what to expect in court, and the flow of their case through the system.
- Provide information to applicants regarding emergency or ex-parte proceedings.
- Communicate effectively with clients of differing economic, cultural, and educational levels who are often in crisis or under stress.
- Cooperate with colleagues and other court staff to provide a high level of customer service to the general public.
- Apply Rules of Professional Conduct, confidentiality, privilege and conflict of interest rules at all times to the provision of limited legal services to self-represented litigants.

This job description reflects management's assignment of essential functions. It does not prescribe or restrict additional various diversified tasks and assignments that may be required by the Judicial Officers and/or Court Administrator.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES

- Ability to work the full-time standard work schedule of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Monday through Friday) with flexibility to accommodate any necessary early or late meetings.
- Maintain a regular, punctual, and reliable level of attendance.
- Ability to work independently and have high level interpersonal skills to handle sensitive and confidential situations.
- Ability to communicate effectively, orally and written, and exercise a high degree of judgment, tact, diplomacy, and competence in dealing with judges, attorneys, court personnel and the public.
- Ability to handle multiple tasks and always maintain a professional demeanor when dealing with court personnel and the public at all times.
- Ability to make decisions based on experience, good judgment, and established policies and procedures.
- Ability to set priorities and simultaneously process multiple duties and responsibilities.
- Ability to pay attention to detail in composing, typing and proofing materials; set priorities and simultaneously process multiple duties and responsibilities.

- Knowledge of and ability to apply fundamentals of business English, spelling, grammar, punctuation, standard office practices and procedures.
- Excellent telephone manner and experience dealing with the public.
- Proficiency in Spanish (written and oral) desirable but not required.
- Ability to lift and transport stacks of court files to perform the essential functions of this position.
- Ability to develop and maintain collaborative and professional working relationships with court personnel and the public.

MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS

- Admitted to practice law in the State of Maryland and a member of the Maryland Bar, with two years' litigation experience in Family law.
- Thorough knowledge of Maryland Family Law and Rules of Procedure, federal law as it applies to family matters, uniform interstate laws, local Family Division services, policies and procedures, as well as resources and referrals for self-represented litigants and indigent persons.
- Excellent organizational skills and customer service are of the highest priority as well as competence and temperament to communicate with the legal community, in-house court personnel and the general public in a fast-paced environment.
- The applicant must have extensive experience and an in-depth understanding of the operations of a court system of general jurisdiction and Family Law.
- Excellent oral communication skills, an even temperament, and culturally competent interpersonal skills are high priority considerations for this position.
- Advanced knowledge of Microsoft Office Suite.
- Superior writing skills and command of English is essential.
- Fluency in a language other than English, preferred.
- An equivalent combination of education and experience may be substituted.

The above statements are intended to describe the general nature and level of work being performed by a person in this position. They are not to be construed as an exhaustive list of all duties that may be performed by such a person.

Statement of Work – Help Center Contractor

COURT seeks a vendor to operate NAME OF COURT HELP CENTER (HC). COURT HELP CENTER provides limited legal services, in accordance with Maryland Rule of Professional Conduct 19-306.5, for people who are not represented by an attorney. Limited legal services include providing legal advice, assistance with completing forms, answering questions about legal topics, explaining court processes and procedures, helping litigants prepare for court hearings and mediation, and making referrals to free or low-cost legal help, the private bar and other legal and social services organizations. Services are provided in-person, at locations throughout the state as well as remotely, by telephone, live chat, email, and videoconferencing.

Program

LOCATION NAME. Located at _____(location in courthouse), this COURT HELP CENTER is open from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday excluding court holidays. There are no appointments and service is provided to walk-in clients only. On average, COURT HELP CENTER LOCATION provides XX instances of service each month.

Deliverables

Vendor shall provide the following services to self-represented litigants:

- Basic procedural information, legal advice, and assistance.
- Information about legal rights and consequences to ensure self-represented litigants are fully informed before proceeding with their case.
- Confirmation of case status and scheduling information.
- Assistance selecting and completing court forms.
- Guidance with preparing for mediation, negotiations, trial, and other court hearings.
- Information about and referrals to the court's alternative dispute resolution services and other court-based programs and services.
- Referrals to legal services providers, the private bar, and other forms of legal help when appropriate.

- Referrals to providers of domestic violence services and domestic violence legal services, especially on-site programs operated by the YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, House of Ruth, Community Legal Services, and others.
- Information about and referrals to social service organizations and government agencies.

Vendor shall:

- Develop orientation and other materials to guide litigants in key case types.
- Provide intake interviewing and triaging.
- Provide assistance in using technological resources including public access computers, assistance with e-filing via MDEC, and assisting litigants with scanning paperwork and entering data into the Maryland Justice Passport app.
- Work with other Judiciary programs that provide assistance to self-represented litigants, including other court help centers.

Cross Training. Staff should be cross trained on all civil legal matters.

Knowledge Base. Vendor shall develop new content for the Court Help Center attorney knowledge base and ensure existing content is reviewed regularly to keep it up to date. Vendor shall work with other statewide Court Help Center staff to develop new content. Knowledge base software will be provided by the Judiciary's Access to Justice group.

Data Collection and Reporting. Vendor shall report on data using provided electronic data collection processes. Data shall be entered in real time. Monthly data shall be entered into a database provided by the Judiciary by the 10th of the following month. Data collected includes, but is not limited to:

- Litigant demographic data
- Litigant zip code
- Location of service
- Method of service (phone, chat, video, walk-in, etc.)
- Case county
- Case type
- Procedural posture of the case
- Average engagement length
- Referrals made

To maintain the program's compliance with Maryland Rule 19-306.5, data should not include personally identifying information. COURT reserves the right to change data collection processes and procedures, question phrasing and other elements of data collection and reporting for this project at any time.

Case Types

The vendor shall employ attorney staff, trained to assist litigants with all civil case types, including but not limited to:

- Landlord and Tenant
- Small and Large Claims
- Debtor/Creditor
- Replevin/Detinue
- Domestic Violence and Peace Orders (if on-site legal services providers are unavailable)
- Expungement
- Child Access and Visitation
- Child Support
- Child in Need of Assistance
- Custody
- Divorce
- Emergency Evaluations
- Expungements
- Foreclosure
- Guardianship
- Juvenile
- Mandamus
- Name Change
- Paternity
- Shielding and Sealing of Court Records
- Termination of Parental Rights
- Truancy
- Probate and Administration of Estates
- Overview of informal briefing to COSA

Some matters may be too complex for litigants to proceed pro se. In these cases, attorneys shall provide general information, procedural guidance, and refer the litigant to seek counsel.

Training and Location Closures

Programs shall be open during the hours indicated above, except for pre-negotiated closures for staff meetings or training. Staff meetings shall not exceed _____ hours per year. Vendor shall minimize disruption and office closures for training and meetings. Staff meetings and trainings should be staggered to ensure continuity of services. The number of closures, and specific dates and times shall be agreed upon in writing each year, on or before June 30.

Inclement Weather or Emergency Closing. In the event of inclement weather or other emergency closing, Help Center staff shall take direction from COURT SUPERVISOR. Staff shall subscribe to the Judiciary's emergency notification system to ensure they are notified of any location closures. Closures for any other reason must be preapproved, in writing, by COURT SUPERVISOR.

Remote Work. All work shall be done on-site in the space provided by COURT. At the direction of the contract manager, Help Center staff may be called upon to provide assistance to litigants remotely. DEFINE WHAT REMOTE WORK WOULD ENTAIL. Staff may be called upon to provide remote help during downtimes, in case of inclement weather, emergencies, or for any other reason.

Responsibilities of the Court

- COURT shall provide the following equipment and materials to the Court Help Centers at no cost to the vendor:
- On-site office space
- Furnishings
- Computer workstations
- General office supplies needed to assist litigants
- Public access computer(s)
- Printer
- Telephones
- Photocopier
- Scanner

COURT will have access to equipment and software at all times for upkeep and maintenance and to access data and reports.

Responsibilities of the Vendor

Services that constitute the practice of law under the Maryland Rules of Professional Conduct must be provided by a licensed attorney. Staff provided by the vendor shall include attorneys and may include paralegal and/or administrative support. All non-attorneys must be supervised by an attorney. All staff shall work on-site in the space provided by the Judiciary.

Materials and Work Products

Materials and work products shall be written and developed by the vendor, in collaboration with COURT SUPERVISOR. COURT shall own all materials and work products provided or developed under this Contract.

Accessibility

Help Center services must be available to all individuals regardless of ability. Vendor must make appropriate accommodations for persons with disabilities, in consultation with the court's ADA coordinator. Vendor shall ensure that all staff review the [Administrative Office of the Court's Accessibility Toolkit](#), and understand how to assist litigants with disabilities. Vendor should be familiar with court programs and services that are available to litigants with disabilities and assist litigants who need help requesting these services.

Language Access

Help Center services must be available to all individuals regardless of language ability. Bilingual staff can enhance the ability of Help Centers to provide assistance to litigants with limited English proficiency.

At least one staff attorney should be able to competently offer court Help Center services, including legal advice, in LANGUAGE MOST PREVALENT IN HELP CENTER JURISDICTION. Vendor should make efforts to recruit and employ bilingual staff who are fluent in other languages as well.

The Maryland Judiciary provides highly qualified interpreters for litigants with limited English proficiency. Interpreters are available for court proceedings and some court-related events, including Court Help Center services. All vendor staff, including attorney and administrative staff, shall review the Administrative Office of the Court's Language

Access Policy, and be familiar with how to use telephonic interpretation, and how to assist litigants with requesting an interpreter for court events.

Acceptance of Services, Materials/Work Products

Acceptance of services will occur upon completion of each of the materials and work products and upon COURT'S determination that all associated duties and responsibilities by the vendor have been met.

Time Period

This contract will run from DATE to DATE. A planning period of up to sixty days may be permitted to allow vendor time to complete start-up activities and to work with the current vendor to ensure continuity of operations. The vendor will work with the COURT SUPERVISOR to manage day-to-day operations of the Court Help Center.

Invoicing

Vendor shall invoice quarterly for all work completed in the previous quarter. Invoices shall be submitted via email on or before DATES.

Invoices shall include the following information: name and address of the COURT, name and remittance address of the vendor, federal taxpayer identification or (if owned by an individual) his or her social security number, the invoice period, invoice date, invoice number, amount due, the purchase order (PO) number(s) being billed and supporting documentation (itemized billing reference for employees, including detail of work hours.)

Invoices submitted without the required information will not be processed for payment until the vendor provides the required information.

Qualifications for Key Personnel

Legal services shall be provided by attorneys who are admitted to practice law in the State of Maryland. All attorney staff must be in good standing with the Court of Appeals of Maryland and have no pending complaints before the Attorney Grievance Commission. Contractors must provide certificates of good standing and signed confidentiality agreements to the contract manager upon hire.

Bilingual staff shall be able to competently provide Court Help Center services, including legal advice, in both English and their other language.

Contractors shall complete quarterly JIS security trainings.

All contractors agree to undergo annual background checks and keep information up to date in the Judiciary's personnel management system.

Contractors shall check Judiciary email daily.

All staff changes including hiring of permanent or temporary staff, staff separations and location changes, must be reported to contract manager within two (2) business days.

Reporting shall be done via email and include the following:

- Employee name
- Employee email
- Employee telephone
- Employee location
- Employee status (permanent, temporary, etc.)

Substitution of Personnel

All proposed substitutes for personnel, for other than emergency situations (illness, death, emergency resignation, or emergency disciplinary termination), shall be submitted for approval, in writing, at least 15 business days before the substitution. All temporary staff must comply with Judiciary policy, including, but not limited to, submitting to background check, providing certificates of good standing (if applicable) and signed confidentiality agreements.

Job Description – Pro Bono Attorney

This **AGREEMENT** is between the Circuit Court for _____ (hereinafter referred to as the “Court”) and _____, Esq., (hereinafter referred to as the “Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney”). This contract is effective _____ and shall expire _____, 2021 unless otherwise extended in writing. The Court reserves the right to extend this contract.

WITNESSETH:

WHEREAS, the Court has developed a program called _____ to provide assistance to self-represented litigants who need help with civil matters and the Court desires the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney to provide services in accordance with the terms stated in this Agreement. **THEREFORE**, for and in consideration of the mutual covenants herein contained, the parties hereto mutually agree to the following:

1. Scope of Work – Attorney agrees to provide self-represented litigants with legal advice and information in civil legal matters. Help includes:

- Basic procedural information, legal advice, and assistance.
- Information about legal rights and consequences to ensure self-represented litigants are fully informed before proceeding with their case.
- Confirmation of case status and scheduling information.
- Assistance selecting and completing court forms.
- Guidance with preparing for mediation, negotiations, trial, and other court hearings.
- Information about and referrals to the court's alternative dispute resolution services and other court-based programs and services.
- Referrals to legal services providers, the private bar, and other forms of legal help when appropriate.
- Referrals to providers of domestic violence services and domestic violence legal services, especially on-site programs operated by justice partners.
- Information about and referrals to social service organizations and government agencies.

2. Performance – Attorney agrees to work _____ hours per year. Attorney must obtain coverage when that attorney is unable to provide assistance on a designated day due to illness, vacation, or other absence.

All funding for the Self-Help Family Law Program is contingent upon the Court receiving funding from the General Assembly of Maryland through the Administrative Office of the Courts and is subject to the final authorization from the Baltimore County Council.

Failure of the Court to appropriate sufficient funds in any future fiscal year of the program shall entitle the Court to terminate this contract. All work performed by the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney will be performed as an independent contractor. The Court (through the County) will not carry Worker's Compensation Insurance or any health or accident insurance to cover the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney during the time periods that the program is conducted. The Court (through the County) will not pay any contributions to Social Security, unemployment insurance, federal or state withholding tax, nor provide any other contributions that might be expected in an employer-employee relationship.

3. Compensation - In consideration of the services provided under this Contract, the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney will be compensated on the basis of \$ _____ per hour for _____ hours per day. Each attorney will be responsible for duties one day per week unless substituting for another attorney assigned to the project. The Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney must provide accurate time records and invoices to the Court on a monthly basis for compensation under this provision. Any time involved in the preparatory work for this contract must be borne by the Self-Help Family Law Attorney. The attorney will not be compensated if a regularly assigned day falls on an official court holiday.

4. Work Product - The Court reserves the right to maintain any work product developed for this program, including but not limited to any forms or hand-outs. The Court also reserves the right at any time to have Court staff observe the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney during the performance of her duties at the program.

5. Termination - Either party may terminate all or part of this agreement, without cause by providing written notice thereof to the other party at least thirty (30) days prior to the intended date of termination at the address set forth below, or at such other address as may be later designated by the parties in writing. In addition, the Court may terminate

this agreement without prior written notice to the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney, if it is determined by the Court, or its representative signed hereunder, that the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney has breached the obligations under this agreement, that there is not sufficient participants at the Self-Help Family Law Program to render the program cost effective, or that the program has not been operating in a satisfactory manner.

6. Representations and Warranties - The Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney hereby warrants and represents that the professional services (if applicable) provided under the agreement shall be performed competently and with due care, and in accordance with all applicable laws, codes, ordinances and regulations. **Under no circumstances, may a Self-Help Family Law Attorney represent a potential domestic litigant seeking assistance in their private law practice.** The Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney shall maintain, at his or her expense, such licenses and certifications as are necessary to provide the services rendered under this agreement and shall present such licenses to the Court upon its request for the same. Each attorney in the project must carry their own malpractice insurance.

7. Confidential Information - The term “confidential information” shall include all non-public documentation and information disclosed to the Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney in the course of the performance of duties hereunder. The Chief Self-Help Family Law Attorney hereby agrees to maintain all such confidential information in trust and confidence and agrees that he/she will not disclose such information to any person, other than a judge of the Circuit Court or as required by law; and

8. Governing Law - The Agreement shall be governed and construed in accordance with Maryland law.

SAMPLE AGREEMENTS FOR SELF-HELP ASSISTANCE

Agreement for Limited Legal Assistance – Sample 1

By signing this document, you are entering into an agreement with HELP CENTER to provide you with limited legal advice to help you better represent yourself in your legal matter. The terms of the agreement are:

Advice: You agree that you will be given limited legal advice by one or more of the attorneys serving at the HELP CENTER.

Intent of Project: The HELP CENTER has been designed for people who have simple legal matters to resolve. **It is not intended for people who have complex matters.** If you are trying to settle complex matters related to taxes, bankruptcy, property, pensions or other retirement income, alimony, and/or immigration, or if you have a contested custody case, or a case that may involve different states, you may be advised to seek representation rather than proceed through the HELP CENTER. If, based on the interview, we feel that your matter is too complex for us to advise you, we will give you the names of organizations that might be able to help you obtain a lawyer. There is no guarantee that any of these organizations will find somebody to represent you.

Scope of Legal Advice: You have asked us to provide you with limited legal advice regarding your civil legal matter. HELP CENTER STAFF may (a) interview you; (b) provide you with limited legal advice regarding which forms you may need to complete and how to complete them properly; and (c) provide you with limited legal advice regarding how to file the forms in Court, how to obtain service of process, what the court procedure is and what to expect at the hearing on your case.

No Representation: You understand that we have not agreed to represent you, and we will not represent you in your case by going to a hearing or trial with you, by preparing your case for trial (other than helping you decide which standard forms to use), or by providing any legal help other than the limited legal advice to be given to you today (as outlined in this document).

Duration of Legal Help: Our agreement to give you limited legal advice begins immediately after you sign this document and will end immediately after we have

provided you with that advice today. **We will not help you beyond today**, although we may choose to do so if you return for further assistance.

Fees: This is a free service. We will not charge attorney's fees for our advice today.

Costs: There are costs that are part of a lawsuit. They include filing fees and subpoena costs. We will not pay any of these costs for you. You agree and understand that you will be responsible for paying these costs.

Conflicts of Interest: You understand that the opposing party may use the services of the Family Law Self-Help Center and that a different attorney or legal assistant (from the one to whom you speak) may provide assistance to the opposing party.

Declining to advise you: We may decline to give you advice if:

1. We determine that your case is not appropriate for self-help.
2. You have already hired an attorney.
3. For any other reason set forth in the Maryland Rules for Professional Conduct.

NOTE: THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE COME TO THIS CENTER FOR HELP IS NOT CONFIDENTIAL, BUT WHAT YOU SAY TO THE ATTORNEY OR PUT ON YOUR INTAKE FORM AT THE CENTER IS CONFIDENTIAL.

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read, understood, and agreed with the terms of this document.

Client Signature

Date _____

Agreement for Court Help Center Assistance – Sample 2

This is an agreement between you, the COURT HELP CENTER (CENTER), and ENTITY THAT STAFFS THE HELP CENTER (ENTITY).

Scope of Representation: The services of CENTER are for individuals who are not represented by an attorney. CENTER cannot assist businesses or third parties, including friends or relatives of the person with the legal problem. If you are represented by an attorney you should speak to your attorney about your legal issue, question and/or case.

Scope of Legal Services: Staff of CENTER will provide short-term limited legal services regarding civil matters within the jurisdiction of the District Court of Maryland, including landlord/tenant, small and large civil claims, debt collection, expungement, replevin/detinue, and protective order/peace order cases. CENTER cannot assist with traffic, criminal, custody, or divorce matters. Limited legal service may include brief advice about your legal problem, general information about the legal system and law, case status information, assistance with the court forms and referrals.

Due to limited space and to preserve visitor confidentiality, CENTER staff will only meet with the person with the legal problem. All others may wait in the waiting area.

Duration of Legal Services: Nothing CENTER or ENTITY does shall create an expectation that CENTER or ENTITY shall provide continuing representation for any legal matter on which you consult with Center staff. While a client-lawyer relationship is established, there is no expectation that the lawyer's representation of you will continue beyond your consultation today. You may return to the Center in the future for further short-term limited legal services consistent with this agreement.

Cooperation: To assist you, we need your cooperation. You agree to answer questions, including some basic demographic information.

Fees: There are no fees for the service. If there are court costs, they are your responsibility.

Declining to Advise: CENTER staff may decline to provide you with legal service for any reason set forth in the Maryland Rules of Professional Conduct.

Conflicts of Interest: The staff member providing limited legal service at CENTER may provide similar assistance to another person involved in your case whose interests may be opposed to yours. If CENTER staff knows that a conflict of interest exists, they may not be able to assist you.

By accepting the services provided by CENTER and by signing this agreement, you are providing informed consent for CENTER and ENTITY to provide services to you even though conflicts of interest may exist. We encourage you to consult another attorney if you have questions about signing this Agreement for Self-Help Assistance.

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have had enough time to review and ask any questions about this Agreement for Self-Help Assistance. I am signing this document voluntarily and accept all the terms of the Agreement for Self-Help Assistance.

DATE

SIGNATURE

PRINT NAME

HELP CENTER FEEDBACK FORM

CATCH ME AT MY BEST!



I like to get caught...At my best, that is. I don't even mind if you turn me in. So, if you catch me exceeding your expectations in any way, please fill out this form and turn "me" in. Thanks for catching me!!!

On ____/____/____ I caught _____
in the _____ Office at their best!

Explanation _____

Sincerely, _____

Questions or comments related to the material contained in this document may be submitted to Lonni Summers at: lonni.summers@mdcourts.gov.