

Is the Long Beach Self-Help Center Meeting the Family Law Needs of the Court and the Community?

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ABSTRACT

The Long Beach Self-Help Center is the first center within Los Angeles county that is completely self-service. Supplied with only printed materials, three computers and a TV/VCR, the self-help center depends on self-represented litigants to identify for themselves which services are available and how to navigate the center to obtain the information they need. This research will determine if the needs of the community and the court are met by the existence of the Long Beach Self-Help Center. This research is significant to the court in determining if this type of center should be expanded to other court locations or modified to replicate existing self-help centers throughout the county.

The goals of this evaluation are to ensure that the needs of the court and community are being met. To test these objectives, an identification of what the court and community expect of the self-help center was evaluated. The court expects parties using the self-help center to know what to expect from the court, how to present their case, and how to complete their documents thoroughly and completely. Parties also learn to provide appropriate supplemental information used by the court in making decisions. The community has different expectations of the self-help center. Users expect to be able to obtain information about how to proceed with their case. Knowing which forms to complete, what the court process is, and how to present their case to the court are measurable objectives of the self-help center.

The research methodology used to evaluate the ability of the self-help center to meet these objectives took the form of time studies, survey questionnaires and specific case evaluations. To measure court efficiency, cases were examined to determine

continuances based upon procedural issues. A time study was also performed to evaluate the time saved by clerical staff processing family law documents. Surveys were distributed to measure impressions of how the self-help center was performing. Surveys of court staff, judicial officers, and self-represented litigants were administered to measure customer satisfaction, their access to justice, and their trust and confidence in the judicial system after using the self-help center.

The findings of the evaluation of the self-help center in Long Beach were favorable, despite the limitations of this evaluation. Litigants, staff and judicial officers approve of the services provided by the self-help center. The court's objectives of becoming more efficient and preparing litigants for court appearances are being met. There is evidence that with expanded use of the self-help center there would be a cost savings to the court through efficient use of staff. Furthermore, litigants appear more prepared for court hearings than they did prior to the self-help center's implementation, but there needs to be an additional focus on this area of assistance. Surveys indicate that self-represented litigants who used the self-help center were satisfied with their experience. The evaluations also indicate that the printed materials adequately meet the customer's need for information. Each group surveyed offered suggestions for further expansion of self-help programs that will enhance the level of satisfaction toward the self-help center.

The preliminary conclusion of the evaluation of the self-help center indicates that the program is beneficial to the court and to the community. There is overwhelming opinion that more would be gained by litigants and the court if clerical staff were located in the center to assist litigants. Specific modifications to the center are necessary to improve the effectiveness of the center, such as relocating to accommodate expanded

hours, a stronger commitment from the technology group for additional support, increasing printed materials, and expanding areas of litigation assistance. Some of these reforms have already taken place, such as dissolution workshops to walk litigants through the dissolution process, from filing a case through completing a proposed judgment. The Long Beach Self-Help Center is meeting the needs of the court and community in many areas and has the potential to improve court and customer satisfaction even further.

INTRODUCTION

A recent movement has taken place within the family law courts that has changed the way that courts must operate and provide services to remain an effective governmental agency for citizens. There is an increasing number of people who participate in the court process by representing themselves rather than being represented by an attorney. The courts have recognized this increase and many courts throughout the country have implemented self-help programs to meet this unprecedented demand.

The Superior Court within the county of Los Angeles has also identified a need for self-represented litigant services and has implemented several programs to further assist these litigants. In the Long Beach Courthouse, a district branch of the Los Angeles County Superior Court, the development and implementation of a Self-Help Center was a major step towards addressing this need. The California Administrative Office of the Court, as well as the Los Angeles Superior Court, have come to realize that there are many types of self-help programs now in existence but their effectiveness varies between programs and locations. To make a determination that the Long Beach Self-Help Center is successful, an evaluation of the program is needed to determine if the needs of the community and the court are being met, and what further assistance can be provided.

The Los Angeles County Superior Court is the largest court system in the nation. The Long Beach courthouse serves the southern portion of the county and handles approximately 5,175 family law filings each year.¹ This is the third largest volume court handling family law matters within Los Angeles county. Judges and staff have

¹ Los Angeles Superior Court Statistics Section, "January – December 2002," Monthly Filing and Dispositions Report, February 20, 2003.

increasingly commented on the increasing number of self-represented litigants who represent themselves during family law proceedings. In 2001, out of 5,024 new family law filings, unrepresented litigants filed 3,460 cases.² With an estimated 69 percent of new family law filings being filed by self-represented litigants, the Long Beach Court quickly recognized the tremendous need for self-represented assistance. The Long Beach Self-Help Center was created as part of a court-wide self-help plan to fulfill those needs.

Self-help programs were beginning to come into existence throughout the various districts of the Los Angeles Superior Court during the late 1990s. Prominent models were opened in the Central District as well as the Van Nuys courthouse featuring a multitude of services: volunteer staffing supervised by attorneys, technological resources, handouts and referral services. The state was also pursuing self-help services by enacting California Family Code Sections 10000 through 10012. These codes provided statutory provisions for self-help services in family law cases and created the Office of the Family Law Facilitator.

While handling the many issues that arose due to the unification of the Superior Court with the Municipal Courts, the new Superior Court developed a Strategic Plan that embraced the Trial Court Performance Standards.³ Addressing each of these standards, access to justice and cultivating a culture of public trust and confidence in the court were primary goals that the court was attempting to attain. Each court location was then charged with developing strategic plan implementation projects to address the

² Wallace, Shana, An Evaluative Proposal for the Priority Implementation of Self-Help Centers in the Various Districts of the L.A. Superior Court, 2001, 4.

³ National Center for State Courts, Court Performance Standards. Guiding the Courts into the Future, 2001.

specific needs of their community. Self-help centers were included on a majority of priority project lists that were submitted to the Executive Officer.

The court then developed a court-wide "Self-Help Vision" that detailed a three-tiered approach to self-help centers.⁴ The first tier described was the full-service centers. These self-help centers were open during court business hours, offered all of the services available throughout the county and maintained a professional staff to assist customers. The second tier approach featured partial service centers. These self-help centers operated on limited hours and focused primarily on informational materials and workshops led by an attorney to assist in dissolution paperwork preparation. The third tiered approach was the completely self-service center. This was the approach initiated in Long Beach. This center had no staff dedicated to assist customers, but rather utilized computer terminals with access to self-help web sites for legal information. Informational packets were available in brochure holders and videos could be checked out from the law librarian. Each of these approaches to a self-help center had beneficial effects on the community.

In a time of budgetary constraints and space limitations, the Long Beach Court was selected to become the first self-service, self-help center in the county described in the third approach to self-help centers. The Administrative Office of the Court awarded Los Angeles Superior Court a \$15,000 grant to develop and implement a self-help center in Long Beach. In a cooperative partnership with the Los Angeles County Law Library located within the courthouse, the Long Beach Self-Help Center opened on July 14, 2003. The self-help center features three personal computers containing information to assist self-represented litigants in a variety of litigation areas. The

⁴ Borys, Bryan, "Plan for Countywide Delivery of Services to Self-Represented Litigants." Judicial Conference, Dana Point, June 2001.

programs offered on these computers are the California Court Self-Help Center, the Los Angeles Superior Court Self-Help Center, and the Interactive Community Assistance Network (ICAN!).

The first computer program provides access to the California Court Self-Help Center. This program provides information in a variety of litigation areas, but has an extensive section dedicated to families and children. This site provides procedural information as well as approved forms for statewide use. The second computer program provides access to the Los Angeles Superior Court self-help web site. This site provides self-help information for family law cases filed within Los Angeles County detailing the specific rules applicable within the County of Los Angeles. This site also gives detailed information about the courthouses within the county. The final computer program features a program entitled I-CAN! This program assists litigants in completing paperwork in an easy to use format by asking a series of simple questions and inputs the information into official court forms that are ready to be filed with the court.

The Long Beach Court set specific goals that this self-help program was to accomplish. The primary goal was to assist people who do not have representation in the best manner possible. To attain this goal a variety of printed materials regarding court programs and procedures, computer-based programs, web sites, and workshops were provided to walk people through the dissolution (divorce) process. The secondary goal of the program was to reduce the workload of court staff. If litigants take advantage of the self-help services, they should be better prepared for hearings and their paperwork should be completed correctly. This will significantly reduce the procedural problems experienced by judges and court employees that routinely delay court proceedings.

The Long Beach Self-Help Center opened last July and now must be evaluated to determine if the court was receiving an adequate return on its investment. There are many measurable objectives that will be explored to determine the adequacy of the program, but the evaluation will also examine comments for additional services that are requested from users of the center. This research will measure organizational goals in several areas to determine if stakeholders are satisfied with the services, if the program provides desirable access and quality of justice, if the program instills public trust and confidence in the judicial system, if community expectations are being met, and if the court is operating more efficiently because of the self-help center.

There are several additional issues to examine to ensure that the evaluation of the Long Beach Self-Help Center is thorough. The history of self-help centers that led to the development of self-help centers in the county of Los Angeles will be reviewed, as well as examining specific aspects that led to the development of the Long Beach Self-Help Center. A detailed description of the findings of surveys taken by customers, staff, and judicial officers will help to demonstrate the effectiveness of the center. Also, a review of various case data will be evaluated to determine the effective use of court resources. Finally, an accumulation of evaluations from customers, staff and judicial officers will be evaluated to ensure that their needs are being met and to determine which future expansions of services are appropriate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As courts attempt to improve public trust and confidence in the legal system, assistance to self-represented litigants poses one of the most crucial areas of concern to consider. The increase in self-represented litigants has been noted in every county throughout California. According to the *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, 4.3 million people represent themselves in California courts each year.⁵ Since the 1990s, courts have seriously examined this issue and are continually working on methods to handle this new movement of self-representation.

Assistance to unrepresented litigants is not unique to California courts. Other courts throughout the country are developing self-represented litigant assistance action plans and finding a variety of means to deal with this increasing population. In some states, legislation has been enacted to assist with this issue. In 1999 Florida enacted a state initiative creating Family Law Rule of Procedure 12.750 that manages the activities of their self-help programs.⁶ By centrally controlling the self-help programs throughout the state, Florida believes that they will be able to bring resources to areas that are in the most need. In 1997, California adopted the Family Law Facilitator Act through California Family Code Sections 10000 through 10002 which statutorily provided that every Superior Court within California's 58 counties create an Office of the Family Law Facilitator.⁷ In these code sections, the importance of family law support

⁵ Thelsen, Kenneth J, "Unbundling Legal Services Will Expand Aid to the Poor," *Los Angeles Daily Journal*, Jan 15, 2002, 6.

⁶ "Tables Showing Significant Features of Pro Se Assistance Programs," *American Judicature Society*, 2003, http://www.ajs.org/prose/pro_talbes.asp

⁷ *California Family Code*, Section 10000 through 10002, 1997. <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/waisgate?WAISdocID=15284514218+0+0+0&WAISaction=retrieve>

and custody issues are regarded as “a serious legal obligation” which resulted in each facilitator’s office being staffed by a licensed attorney.

Other than statutory provisions, many states including Vermont, Idaho, Indiana and Maryland have established their pro se assistance programs by order of the Supreme Court within their respective states. There does not seem to be any one legislative act or law that establishes self-help programs, but the courts and legislatures acknowledge the problem and are committed to working together to provide these services to their constituents.

The extent of the issue of serving self-represented litigants that exists throughout many of the states is also reflected in the California courts. The poor communities in California may be the most dramatically affected by lack of available legal resources. *Legal Services Corporation* conducted a survey that estimated that due to the shortages in legal aid resources, more than three-fourths of California’s poor must either represent themselves or forsake the judicial system altogether and handle their problems in other ways.⁸ The California State Bar also confirms this statistic and the fear that people are either resolving cases by other unconventional means or not addressing the problems at all. There is increasing concern that a lack of income may be a larger barrier to access to justice than previously believed. The Office of the Family Law Facilitator conducted a survey revealing that 82 percent of those using the services of the facilitator had incomes under \$2,000 per month statewide and 77 percent were within Los Angeles County.⁹ Though lack of income may be a significant barrier, courts are

⁸ Serrano, Stephanie, “The Little (Search) Engine That Could,” Legal Services Corp., Summer 2001, 3.

⁹ Chase, Deborah J. and Hough, Bonnie Rose, [A Report and Analysis of Action Plans Throughout California](#), “Integrated Services for Self-Represented Litigants in the Court System,” June 2003, www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications/actionplanrpt.htm

recognizing that this does not need to be insurmountable, if appropriate services are provided.

There is also a concern that more people are handling their cases unrepresented regardless of income levels. The Judicial Council of California published a report in 2003 indicating that in 85 percent of proceedings occurring in 1998, at least one party was in pro per.¹⁰ This figure is consistent with data collected by other state agencies as well. The Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS) data represents that 80 percent of dissolutions had petitioners in pro per. Further, the data also represents that 96 percent of paternity cases had petitioners in pro per.¹¹ All of these litigants do not fall into the category of what the state considers “poor”. Parties, regardless of income, are choosing to represent themselves in family law proceedings. In a study by the American Bar Association, they found that 20 percent of the self-represented litigants surveyed indicated that they can afford an attorney, but do not want one.¹² This may be due to the deficiencies in the court system regarding public trust and confidence, but it may also just be a cultural change as self-service is becoming more prevalent in every aspect of daily life.

Self-help programs have emerged as the leading method to handle the growing self-represented population. There are a variety of models and services provided across the country, but they all are attempting to improve access to justice and improve the public perception of the court and judicial system. Several states have taken a very

¹⁰ Holton, Lynn, “New State Task Force to Assist Litigants Without Lawyers,” Aug 2003, www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications/actionplanrpt.htm

¹¹ “Tables Showing Significant Features of Pro Se Assistance Programs,” *American Judicature Society*, 2003, http://www.ajs.org/prose/pro_talbes.asp

¹² Collins, Paula, *The Genesis – Why Create the Self-Service Center?*, October 7, 2003, 1.

proactive approach to addressing the unrepresented litigant need and have paved the way for other states to model.

Providing services to self-represented litigants has been accepted by the legal community as affording equal access to the courts for everyone. With the development of family courts in various states such as Florida and New York, more people are coming to the courts with multiple issues and representing themselves. There are a variety of factors that have lead courts to develop self-help centers. Courts' have found that overburdened clerical offices, poorly prepared pleadings, delayed proceedings and frustration of counsel and judges were significant factors that justified the courts participation in providing self-represented assistance. The type of cases that cause the most frustration for courts is in the area of family law. Child custody and support issues are very emotional and many times the parties do not understand the procedures to follow to achieve their intended goal.

The complex procedure of bringing cases to court is why many self-represented litigants often have incomplete and incorrect forms. The results of a study done by the National Center for State Courts indicate that the real barriers to the court system for self-represented litigants are the courts own procedures and administrative requirements.¹³ Complex control of cases by judicial officers, restrictions on access, and scarcity of resources only makes the process more difficult for self-represented litigants. Self-help centers try to navigate self-represented litigants through this complex system to resolve the issues.

¹³ Dent College of Law, Institute of Design and National Center for State Courts, "Access to Justice: Meeting the Needs of Self-Represented Litigants," 1999-2003, www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications, 8.

The issue of self-help has been embraced throughout the court system. Organizations such as “selfhelpsupport.org”¹⁴ and the National Center for State Courts, among others, each provide extensive updated catalogs of self-help topics and issues that are taking place in the nations’ trial courts. These organizations are vital to the constant development and improvement of self-represented litigant services.

A new trend in assisting self-represented litigants is through a limited amount of legal assistance. Attorneys may assist with some portions of the dissolution process, but not be involved in the entire case. This concept is called unbundling and is being explored throughout the country.¹⁵

The challenge of developing programs to assist self-represented litigants is often the most difficult task. A variety of information is available regarding self-represented litigants and how other courts have developed programs to assist in this area.¹⁶ As an important resource to the self-represented litigant community, this resource links to various pro se centers and other resources throughout the community.¹⁷

Arizona Self-Help Centers

Arizona courts were at the forefront of the self-help movement. The Phoenix Self-Service Center opened in October 1995, followed by the Mesa Center in May 1996 and the Surprise Center in July 2003.¹⁸ Supported by the Supreme Court of Arizona, the

¹⁴ Selfhelpsupport.org. 2002, <http://www.selfhelpsupport.org/>.

¹⁵ Herman, Madelynn M., “Pro Se: Self-Represented Litigants Trends in 2003: Limited Scope Legal Assistance: An Emerging Option for Pro Se Litigants,” 2003, http://www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications/KIS_ProSe_Trends03.pdf.

¹⁶ CourTopics, Pro Se: “Self-Represented Litigants National Center for State Courts,” 2003. <http://www.ncsconline.org/WCDS/topiclisting.htm>.

¹⁷ Knowledge & Information Services, “Pro Se: Self-Represented Litigants Frequently Asked Questions,” 2003, http://www.ncsconline.org/WC/FAQs/KIS_ProSeFAQ.pdf.

¹⁸ Collins, Paula, The Delivery System: How Do You Access the Self-Service Centers? October 7, 2003, 1.

courts have partnered with the law libraries of the various counties for space and resources. The center provides over 450 forms and instructions at no cost, on their web site and throughout their service centers. Detailed information is provided to litigants about filing documents and describing what further steps are necessary to proceed with the case. One impressive aspect of the center is that they provide an on-line child support guideline chart as well as a specific child support calculator for parties to determine the correct amount of child support to request.¹⁹ A glossary of court terminology is available to assist litigants navigating through the court process and legal referrals are made for those in need of additional detailed professional assistance. The Coconino County Self-Service Center also has services, information and brochures available in Spanish to accommodate the large Spanish-speaking population in that community. On site at this Self-Service Center is a non-profit agency that provides free legal services to low-income clients called DNA – People’s Legal Services. Arizona provides an extensive level of service for their communities and is a model for other courts throughout the nation.

Florida Self-Help Centers

Florida provides comprehensive self-help services that are coordinated statewide. Since Florida is such a large state with twenty circuits, the coordination of services depends on the diverse population of that state. They have developed a unique self-help center locator to assist litigants in obtaining necessary legal services.²⁰ In addition to this service, the self-help centers and web site provide interactive family

¹⁹ Arizona Supreme Court, Self-Service Center, June 2003, <http://www.supreme.state.az.us/selfserv/>.

²⁰ “Self Help Contact Information,” Local Self Help Programs, 2003, <http://www.flcourts.org/osca/divisions/family/selfhelp/map.html#anchor17463>

law forms and instructions that have been approved by the Florida Supreme Court. Each of the centers offer individual assistance and inform self-represented litigants of court rules and procedures that prepare litigants for their court hearings.

California Regional Conferences

California's attempt to address the unrepresented litigant issue began in the early 1990s. Parties represent themselves more in Family Law litigation than in any other area of litigation. Issues such as dissolution, child custody and domestic violence are very emotional issues and unprepared parties make the process even more difficult. In 1996, the California Office of Family Court Services conducted a study that revealed that 62 percent of the cases in California family courts, report some sort of physical violence.²¹ With the additional burden of domestic violence occurring within the household, specific and accurate information is imperative to resolve these issues and ensure the safety of the litigants and their children.

At the request of the State Bar of California, the Judicial Council in California approved the formation of the Task Force for Unrepresented Litigants. The task force was tasked with several duties including coordinating all self-help activities throughout the state, developing a statewide pro per action plan and making recommendations for further improvements and possible funding of self-help programs. The Judicial Council determined that even though there are many self-represented services available throughout the state, the demand exceeds the current supply of services.²² The Judicial Council through the Administrative Office of the Court was determined to effectively provide the necessary services to unrepresented litigants.

²¹ "Client Baseline Snapshot Study," California Office of Family Court Services, 1996.

²² Holton, Lynn, "New State Task Force to Assist Litigants Without Lawyers," <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/presscenter/newsreleases/NR45-00.HTM>, Aug 30, 2000.

In November 1999, the Chief Justice of California attended a conference through the American Judicature Society and sponsored by the State Justice Institute entitled the “National Conference on Self-Represented Litigants Appearing in Court.” During this conference, he decided that within California, there would be a plan to have four regional conferences for the trial courts to develop their own self-represented assistance plans. The four regional conferences would address the many variations in population and culture throughout the state. The concept behind these conferences was to create an effective system of coordinating resources, to replicate effective programs, and to communicate current issues and solutions that occur in self-help centers.

The regional conferences took place and allowed representatives from each of the state’s fifty-eight counties to participate. There were thirty workshops held at each conference that addressed a variety of issues from changing court processes to developing funding for self-help programs.²³ These conferences enabled each county to identify with other counties with similar demographics and to evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided in those areas. The conferences were a success with over 600 people attending. A resource center was then established showcasing innovations and distributing materials that would be helpful statewide. Each county then began to develop their own action plans to assist self-represented litigants. At the conference 49 percent of participants indicated that access to legal information was in their needs assessment. The other 51 percent incorporated access to legal information in their program designs.²⁴ The benefit of the conference was that everyone became

²³ Corren, Blaine. “Action Plan to Aid Pro Pers.” Court News, Sept-Oct 2003, <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov>, 8.

²⁴ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 6.

aware of the issues and developed methods to address self-represented litigants' needs.

In 2001, each county developed an action plan for self-represented litigants. Out of these action plans, 96 percent of the counties proposed self-help centers with staff to assist unrepresented litigants.²⁵ Only three courts proposed self-help centers that were not staffed by court employees. These centers would provide written information and technology to provide legal assistance. Each was proposed to be located in the community, rather than in the courthouse. This self-service center model is ultimately what was developed in the Long Beach Courthouse. One aspect that approximately one-third of the participants included in their action plan was dissolution workshops. Family Law matters have legal and procedural similarities statewide which makes this area of litigation ideal for the workshop environment.

In each of the self-help centers throughout the state, technology would be used in approximately 90 percent of the facilities. Though a vague term, most counties identified specific aspects of technology that they believed would be helpful. Some of the services would include: on-line assistance, web site expansion, interactive forms programs, kiosks, videos, and telephone trees.²⁶ Each of these could provide valuable services to litigants, but each county based their plans on the needs of the community and the financial status of their court.

On a statewide level, each county developed distinctive self-help action programs. The Judicial Council of California developed the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants to review the final submissions of action plans from the fifty-eight

²⁵ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 15.

²⁶ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 20.

counties and then developed a statewide action plan. The task force was able to identify community resources throughout the state and coordinate them to benefit broader areas. In July 2001, the Administrative Office of the Court developed the California Court Online Self-Help Center.²⁷ This web site provides litigants with information on a variety of litigation areas and an extensive portion is dedicated to children and family issues. As the largest court in the nation, the California court system is attempting to take the lead in self-help programs and assistance.

The Judicial Council of California during this time also conducted a survey to determine what were the needs of the citizens of California.²⁸ Finding a mean average of 67 percent of people in Family Law cases statewide who were self-represented, the need to inform litigants about the court process was evident. As the survey progressed, it was clear that the first and most important aspect that people wanted was the availability of staff to answer procedural questions. The need to simply direct people to correct forms or services could be easily accomplished and productive in achieving the court's goals. Helpful printed materials, (such as step-by-step instructional procedures for going to court containing a diagram of the court process) was the second most requested service. Internet and attorney referrals were also requested as important aspects that would help satisfy the customers needs. If courts could achieve these goals, the public would be satisfied with the court's assistance and continue to pursue their case on their own. As a second portion of this survey, it was necessary to survey court staff to see if their perceptions of what the public requested was what the public truly wanted. The findings of this survey indicated that the most useful resource for the

²⁷ Judicial Council of California, -"CA Courts Self-Help Center," 2003, <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/selfhelp>.

²⁸ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 9.

public would be written materials. Internet access came in second, followed by having staff available to answer questions. Interestingly, the perception of court staff did include the aspects of the needs of the public, but was not in the priority order of the public. Issues such as these may demonstrate the important need for research prior to implementation of programs in specific communities.

Ventura County Self-Help Centers

In 1996, the Ventura Superior and Municipal Courts developed a self-help clinic.²⁹ Ventura County has been a leader within California regarding self-help programs. The Ventura Family Law Self-Help Center offers a multitude of services including group classes on common issues, one-on-one attorney assistance, assistance with selection, samples, completion of forms, and legal referrals. This program also opened a child waiting room for families to use while litigants obtain information regarding their family issues. As a leader in the state, Ventura had several unique ideas to serve the community. The first was the establishment of a mobile self-help center. A mobile home equipped with self-help computers, information, staff, and forms brought services to the communities. This proved beneficial since people often could not take time from work to go to a courthouse. The second unique aspect of their program was to provide a clerk from the court who would be able to file documents, collect fees and provide fee waivers at the self-help center. This enabled parties to complete and process their paperwork in one location.

The Ventura County self-help program is a court-based program that assists litigants regardless of their income level. Though the program is part of the court's community outreach effort, the court entered into partnerships with other legal

²⁹ Collins, Paula, The Delivery System: How Do You Access the Self-Service Centers? October 7, 2003, 1.

assistance programs to provide these services. When the program was developed, the Ventura Superior Court set up specific objectives. A need to improve the administration of justice by helping people to help themselves was made part of the court's strategic plan. The program also wanted to ensure that people were prepared for their hearings and for hearings to move more efficiently. By effectively helping to prepare litigants with their paperwork for hearings, courts were supposed to move more quickly and minimize delays due to procedural issues. The court also took a proactive role by setting aside one day each week for the family law calendar to be devoted exclusively to self-represented litigants.

The Ventura Court has also recently distributed written alternatives to litigants in family law cases.³⁰ By offering litigants alternatives to the formal dissolution process, parties may elect to participate in the many services offered by the court instead. The benefit for the court is fewer cases and the benefit for the parties is a negotiated settlement with more options.

The extent of the self-represented movement in Los Angeles county is large and appears to be growing each year. The legal community as well as other social service agencies, are examining this population and developing programs to address this need. The *Los Angeles Daily Journal* indicated that 47 percent of low-income households in the county were found to have active legal situations.³¹ A majority of these cases involve children and families. The large volume of self-represented litigants participating in the court process is more evident by the legal assistance agencies

³⁰ Wilson, Tracy, "Ventura County Offers Alternatives to Nasty Divorces: Spouses Breaking Up Will Receive a Letter on Resolving Disputes Without a Court Battle." Los Angeles Times 2 Jan 2004, Home Ed.: B4.

³¹ Thelsen, Kenneth J., "Unbundling Legal Services Will Expand Aid to the Poor," Los Angeles Daily Journal, 15 Jan 2002, 6.

working with the court. Legal Aid of Orange County indicated that 80 percent of their customers either do not qualify for free legal services or cannot afford an attorney.³²

These litigants caught in the middle are the targets of court sponsored self-help programs. During the year 2000, more than 250,000 cases were filed with at least one party filing in pro per.³³ In 2001, it was estimated that 282,000 new filings were received from self-represented litigants.³⁴ The volume that the court was then experiencing indicated that policy issues also had to be addressed.

To address the needs of this growing population, a survey was conducted in 2001 to determine what court staff believed could help with this issue.³⁵ The staff suggested checklists that could be given to parties so that they would know what to present to the court during the hearings and how the hearings would proceed. Clerical staff thought that if they had a simple handout with helpful web sites, lawyer referral services and other locations to obtain assistance, they would be better able to assist litigants when they come to the clerk's office. This recommendation was in line with other statewide recommendations regarding the need to provide procedural and limited legal advice to litigants representing themselves. The study concluded that parties needed assistance not only before the hearings, but also after the hearings to complete required orders or judgments.

Los Angeles Superior Court began to develop a variety of assistance programs for unrepresented litigants in the late 1990s once the extent of the unrepresented

³² Tavarez, A.J., Telephone Interview, 17 July 2003.

³³ Matherly, Susan, "A Plan for Countywide Delivery of Services to Self-Represented Litigants," Judicial Conference, Dana Point, CA, June 2001.

³⁴ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 8.

³⁵ Wallace, Shana, "An Evaluative Proposal from the Priority Implementation of Self Help Centers in the Various Districts of the L.A. Superior Court," 2001.

population was realized and court based solutions became more apparent. The court expected that self-help programs would save courtroom time, reduce inaccurate paperwork, reduce inappropriate filings, reduce unproductive court appearances resulting in continuances, and increase expeditious case management and settlement programs. With these goals in mind, self-help programs were becoming a reality within the county of Los Angeles.

During this period the Los Angeles Superior Court, as well as the Judicial Council of California, were working on court-wide Strategic Planning. The first statewide strategic goal is Access, Fairness and Diversity.³⁶ The goal is to ensure that each Californian has equal access to the courts. They should be able to participate equally in court proceedings whether they are represented or not, and they must be treated fairly by everyone in the judicial system. When the Los Angeles Superior Court developed its own Strategic Plan, it was divided into issues, goals, and objectives.³⁷ The court addressed several issues including how to serve an increasingly diverse Los Angeles, how to respond to stakeholder and customer expectations, and how to provide and maintain flexible and responsive governance. When each court location began to develop potential priority projects to implement the court's goals, establishing self-help centers unique to the population was at the top of the list. Self-help centers addressed several of the court's main issues in strategic planning.

³⁶ Judicial Council of California, "Leading Justice Into the Future," Strategic Plan, <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/documents/stplan2k.pdf>, March 2000, 9.

³⁷ Los Angeles Superior Court, "Court-Wide Goals and Objectives," Local Level Planning and Court Improvement, April 2001, 15.

The Trial Court Performance Standards

The Executive Officer then stressed a new concept for the Los Angeles Superior Court. The court was to be the “Nation’s Largest Neighborhood Court.” The concept behind this was that although this court is the largest in the nation, it should not feel that way. Services should be brought to the local communities to encourage citizens to use the court to help resolve their problems. Mr. John A. Clarke [Executive Officer] is “focused on customer service, user friendliness and community outreach.”³⁸ It was clear that Mr. Clarke understood the problem the courts were facing by failing to deliver needed services to citizens who were representing themselves. The Los Angeles Superior Court had to make an overt decision that it would provide additional services to citizens allowing them to effectively participate in the judicial process. With direction from the leaders within the court, self-help centers address the need to be a “neighborhood” court, satisfy the local strategic plan, and use the Trial Court Performance Standards.

A focus on the Trial Court Performance Standards has been a longstanding goal of the Los Angeles Superior Court. The court has focused many programs on the various performance areas to ensure that it is operating effectively and providing needed services to local citizens. When the concept of self-help centers was discussed, it was clear that this would satisfy a majority of the performance areas in the Trial Court Performance Standards that were being targeted.³⁹

The first performance area of Access to Justice is the primary goal of self-help centers throughout the county. By providing informational and instructional materials to

³⁸ Martone, Kenneth, District Administrators Meeting Minutes, Dec. 18, 2000.

³⁹ Court Performance Standards, Guiding the Courts into the Future, National Center for State Courts, Institute for Court Management, April 2001, 3-3.

self-represented litigants, the court is able to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the judicial process. The Los Angeles Superior Court also provided self-help information on their web site to extend access beyond the courthouse and make information available at any time.

The focus of the court on the performance area of Expedition and Timeliness was the goal that the court hoped to gain by developing self-help centers. There is the belief that if litigants are able to prepare their documentation correctly and completely, staff would be able to process the work more expeditiously allowing cases to progress more quickly. Further, if parties are able to obtain information from self-help centers about the court process, they become better prepared for court hearings. This will enable judicial officers to handle their cases more expeditiously and effectively.

The other performance areas including Equality, Fairness and Integrity, Independence and Accountability, and Public Trust and Confidence are also addressed by the development of self-help centers. As information is provided to self-represented litigants on the court process, they become more educated as to how the court operates and what limitations are placed on the court. By ensuring that the parties begin with the same basic information, the perception that the court is fair is achieved. Those who do not know the court system well often challenge the independence of the court. This educational process demonstrates that courts are independent from other branches of government and will rule fairly regardless of who appears before the court. Finally, after litigants experience the self-help center, file their documentation with the clerk's offices, and appear before the court, the goal is for them to have Trust and Confidence in the legal process. Self-help centers may ensure that these areas of the

Trial Court Performance Standards are addressed within Los Angeles County and assist the court in achieving its goals.

In the Los Angeles Superior Court, the need for self-help centers was evidenced by a survey done regarding staff impressions of self-represented litigants.⁴⁰ The issue of “Legal Advice” continues to frustrate court staff because of the vagueness of the concept. They expressed frustration because many times they know the answers to the questions that customers ask, yet feel that it falls into the area of legal advice and they are not able to assist them. Court staff also indicate that litigants do not pay attention, do not understand the law, do not understand why they are in court, do not know how to present information to the court, and are late for court.⁴¹ Based on their responses, it is clear that court staff have seen many litigants experiencing similar problems who are in need of a location to refer parties who request assistance. Once the need was clearly established, Los Angeles Superior Court began the self-help center development process.

A Three-Tiered Approach to Self-Help Centers

Los Angeles Superior Court developed a three-tiered approach when developing self-help programs.⁴² The first model would be a full service self-help program. This would offer a variety of information and services, would be staffed by an attorney, and would offer workshops and clinics to help with common procedural issues that self-represented litigants face. The center would be open during the hours of the court. The second model would be a partial service model. This model would try to offer as many

⁴⁰ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 10.

⁴¹ Chase, Report and Analysis of Action Plans 11.

⁴² Borys, Bryan, “Plan for Countywide Delivery of Services to Self-Represented Litigants,” Judicial Conference Dana Point, June 2001, 9.

services as possible, but with limited hours and resources. This type of center would focus more on providing information to litigants. The final model would be a self-serve self-help center where the litigants would have access to informational pamphlets, samples, and computer kiosks. This model would not be staffed, but would rely solely on litigants locating and completing their documents on their own.

The Van Nuys Courthouse features the county's first approach to self-help centers by offering the full-service approach to assist self-represented litigants. Neighborhood Legal Services, a non-profit organization, staffs the center and provides many of the written materials that are now being used throughout the county.⁴³ A staff attorney, with the help of paralegals, supervises the center. In a partnership with local law schools, many of the staff who assist customers are students. The staff at the center assists litigants in filling out forms and explaining court procedure. The center also features a variety of self-help materials and flyers including sample forms for litigants to compare their documentation with. The beneficial aspect of many of the packets is the step-by-step instruction to litigants for completing each required field. The center also developed detailed maps and instructions for litigants directing them to various locations around the courthouse ensuring that they go to the correct courtroom or office. Computer kiosks are also available to provide additional assistance that is offered through the California Court web site and the Los Angeles Superior Court web site.

In addition to the one-on-one assistance provided by the Van Nuys Self-Help Center, it also features various workshops to help people with common procedural issues. Workshops are offered in a variety of litigation areas, but Family Law is the

⁴³ Borys, Plan for Countywide Delivery 7.

most highly attended. Van Nuys offers a three-step dissolution workshop that has been replicated in other courthouses throughout the county.⁴⁴ The first workshop focuses on completing a dissolution petition thus ensuring that all the necessary information is contained within the petition. The second workshop focuses on income and expense preparation as well as property disclosure statements to prepare the litigant for the trial. The third workshop enables litigants to prepare a proposed judgment in uncontested dissolution cases to present to the court at the time of trial, thus completing the process immediately.

To provide access to as many self-represented litigants as possible, the self-help center is open during the same hours as the court. Court personnel found that having this resource to refer people to has been very helpful.⁴⁵ To further expand services, the center offers bilingual assistance to litigants needing help completing their family law or fee waiver forms. This self-help center has been extremely successful and has even relocated to a larger space to accommodate the volume of people using the center. The center is a county-funded program that has allowed the court to remain independent, yet still involved in the process.⁴⁶ The court works very closely with the county in the support of the Van Nuys Self-Help Center.

The second model for self-help centers that Los Angeles Superior Court has implemented is Family Law Information Centers. There are two located within the county: one in the Central Los Angeles courthouse and one in the Norwalk courthouse.

⁴⁴ Brinkman, Debra, Telephone Interview, 3 November 2003.

⁴⁵ Wallace, Shana, An Evaluative Proposal for the Priority Implementation of Self Help Centers in the Various Districts of the L.A. Superior Court, 2001, 2.

⁴⁶ Borys, Plan for Countywide Delivery 7.

These information centers provide assistance to the public regardless of financial need and have many of the services offered in the full-service self-help center model.

An attorney, several paralegals, and support staff provide procedural guidance, but not legal advice to litigants who visit these centers. Focusing specifically on family law issues, more expertise can be given to people seeking marital dissolutions, separations, annulments, paternity, and domestic violence actions.⁴⁷ These centers offer a variety of informational and instructional materials to litigants to assist in completion of their documents. They also offer one-on-one assistance explaining court procedure and what to expect when going to court. Kiosks are available to help litigants use the self-help web sites offered through the Administrative Office of the Court and Los Angeles Superior Court. These kiosks also allow litigants to access other reference materials and a program named “Smartlaw” developed by the Los Angeles County Bar Association that provides legal information and referrals for family law cases.

Divorce workshops are conducted by a staff attorney as part of the self-help programs offered in these locations. Focusing on assisting self-represented litigants through the entire dissolution process, a series of workshops are conducted twice each month at various courthouse locations. The distinguishing factors between the Family Law Information Center model of self-help program and the full-service self-help program offered in Van Nuys would be the specific focus here on family law issues and the limited hours of this center’s operation.⁴⁸ These types of programs are state-funded with the intention of focusing on domestic issues for self-represented litigants.

⁴⁷ Family Law – Overview – Family Law Information Center, Nov 03, <http://courtnet.sc.co.la.ca.us/internet/familylaw/ov-infocenter.htm>.

⁴⁸ Family Law – Overview.

The third and final model for self-help programs is a self-service model that does not require any staffing, but relies on technology and the customers to use the assistance available within the center. This third model is located at the Long Beach courthouse and is the only one of its kind in the county of Los Angeles. This model is the focus of this research project which will determine if this type of self-help center meets the needs of the court and the community.

The Long Beach Court Pro Per Program

The Long Beach Court as part of the Los Angeles County Superior Court has made many strides in enhancing the judicial system by implementing the Trial Court Performance Standards and pursuing Strategic Planning. In 1998, Ronna Uruburu, the District Administrator for the South District of the Los Angeles Superior Court, prepared a research project for the National Center for State Courts as part of the Court Executive Development Program entitled, "Initiating the Trial Court Performance Standards."⁴⁹ In her evaluation, she discussed the need to continually pursue these standards within the Long Beach courthouse beyond her initial implementation. The strategic planning process began in 1999 and specific areas such as providing access to justice became key components of the plan which were a continuation of the implementation of the Trial Court Performance Standards a year earlier. A self-help center was one of the main priority projects that would help the Long Beach Courthouse address many of the issues within the strategic plan.

Space was a major consideration in developing a self-help center. In the other self-help models, courthouse space, as well as mobile trailers, were used to offer these types of programs. Long Beach was in a unique position because the courthouse was

⁴⁹ Uruburu, Ronna, Initiating the Trial Court Performance Standards, May 1998.

filled to capacity and mobile trailers were already used to house makeshift courtrooms. The law library and the court entered into negotiations for space and resources. District Administrators, Ronna Uruburu and Darryl Mahood, envisioned the law library partnership. Their concept was to develop a partnership to provide printed materials, forms, instructions, and some technology based applications.⁵⁰ The partnership began in early 2002 and provided the space necessary to open the first self-serve self-help center.

The flagship program of this self-help center is a computer program entitled ICAN! (Interactive Community Assistance Network). This software was developed by the Legal Aid Society of Orange County and jointly sponsored by public and private organizations.⁵¹ ICAN! has been used extensively in the County of Orange and was offered to the County of Los Angeles to technologically assist with self-help programs. The ICAN! program features a touch screen interface (on some terminals), a Frequently Asked Questions section, and video court tours. The key aspect of this program is that it allows the litigant to answer a series of questions pertaining to their legal situation. These are simple-to-understand questions that litigants can answer with ease without being familiar with legal jargon. The answers are then transposed onto legal forms in the correct format and printed for the litigant to file with the clerk. Further, the program provides detailed instructions for the litigant regarding what information is available and how to serve the other party.

The center also provides access to two other web sites that offer legal assistance. The first is the Los Angeles Superior Court self-help web site. This site

⁵⁰ Borys, Plan for Countywide Delivery 8.

⁵¹ "Electronic Kiosks Debut," Court News Judicial Council of California, Spring 1999.

offers information regarding all aspects of the Family Law division including dissolutions, paternity, custody/support issues and restraining orders.⁵² This site has proven to be very useful because it informs litigants about specific programs available through the court as well as specific information when filing in one of the Los Angeles Superior Court courthouses. The second web site is the California Court web site. This web site is sponsored by the Administrative Office of the Courts and is a tremendous resource for self-represented litigants by providing procedural information that is common to courts throughout the state. This web site also allows litigants to complete and print approved family law forms. With these three web sites available for use, self-represented litigants are able to obtain information about legal procedure for filing cases, file a case through a simple step-by-step program, and appear prepared for their court hearings.

The self-help center in Long Beach offers a variety of reference materials for self-represented litigants. The center has informative pamphlets about the court, the legal process, procedures, and instructions on how to fill out legal forms.⁵³ There is also information provided by the Long Beach and Los Angeles Bar Associations regarding legal referrals if litigants require legal advice or representation. To further assist self-represented litigants, the center offers a variety of videos that can be viewed explaining the process of obtaining or responding to a domestic violence restraining order. Although there are no one-on-one services provided in the self-help center, Los Angeles Superior Court has been able to replicate the dissolution workshop aspect from the second model for this type of self-help center as well. Workshops instructing litigants

⁵² Family Law – Self Help, Los Angeles Superior Court, Nov 2003, <http://courtnet.sc.co.la.ca.us/internet/familylaw/>.

⁵³ Borys, Plan for Countywide Delivery 2.

how to complete all the necessary documentation to obtain a dissolution are offered twice each month in the courthouse. All of these services came together to form the Long Beach Self-Help Center that opened on July 14, 2003.

Though all of these resources are available to self-represented litigants, the question still remains; Is this an effective program that meets the needs of the court and the community? Since this was the first center to open that was not staffed, it posed an exciting challenge that could change the way that self-help centers operate. Using technology could eliminate the need for staffing, thus saving the courts strained financial resources. The Executive Officer, Mr. John A. Clarke, made it clear that his intention was to focus on customer service, user friendliness, and community outreach.⁵⁴ With the development of this self-help center, the outreach to the community was created. There was still some concern regarding the use of technology as the only means of assisting self-represented litigants. Some people prefer to use a computer instead of having a one-on-one experience with another person when addressing issues of domestic violence or some sensitive family relation matters. A report regarding the proposed use of kiosks warned, "The image of a neighborhood court would be weakened by the substitution of an automated system for human contact."⁵⁵ This is one of the aspects measured in this research project that explores if the self-help center meets the needs of all parties involved. The Judicial Council set an objective to improve the ability of trial courts throughout the state to increase access and fairness to self-represented litigants.⁵⁶ The attempt by the Long Beach Courthouse to meet this

⁵⁴ Clarke, John A., District Administrators Meeting, December 18, 2000.

⁵⁵ Osborne, C. Jean, "Kiosk Objectives and Contents," Kiosk, Nov 13, 2001, 1.

⁵⁶ Judicial Council of California, "Leading Justice Into the Future," Operational Plan, Fiscal Years 2000-2001 through 2002-2003, 10.

objective was the implementation of the self-help center. All who appear before the court are given the opportunity to participate effectively without undue hardship or inconvenience.

METHODOLOGY

To thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of the Long Beach Self-Help Center as it relates to Family Law matters, the research methodology varied, and was based on the specific aspect of the self-help center that was being evaluated. The focus of this research is to determine if the self-help center is meeting the needs of the court and the community. Areas that will be evaluated include: (1) court efficiency, (2) customer satisfaction, (3) public trust and confidence, (4) access to justice, and (5) customer expectations. The final key aspect to this evaluation is customer recommendations to improve or expand the services offered by the Long Beach Self-Help Center. This research will be applied to enhance the self-help services provided by the Long Beach Self-Help Center, but may also be used by others considering developing a self-help center that is primarily focused on using technology as a primary resource of self-help rather than providing staff to assist customers.

Population Identification

Each aspect examined in this evaluation includes a specific population size that was measured. As each area of measurement is identified, various methodologies were implemented to achieve measurable results used to develop a conclusion.

There was a focus on descriptive statistics to examine the population being studied and correlational statistics to determine if there is a possible relationship between those who use the self-help center and court efficiency. To collect the data necessary for this type of evaluation, an analysis of the computer system used by the family law division was performed. Specific data was compiled to determine the population size of the study resulting in a list of specific court cases. This list was generated identifying all cases where at least one of the parties was a self-represented

litigant. A pre-test of this data was analyzed to determine if the data matched the desired parameters of the overall evaluation. Unfortunately, the data collected at the court location went beyond the scope of this project due to the limited time standards of this study (July through November). Due to this obstacle, a service request to the Los Angeles Superior Court's Information and Technology Bureau resulted in the compilation of case data that accurately reflected the size of the population that was to be studied. The data used to obtain this population was retrieved from the single database used for all family law matters within the Long Beach Courthouse. The parameters for this portion of the study were cases filed between July 15, 2003 and November 15, 2003 with at least one party appearing as a self-represented litigant.

The limitation to the collection of this data was that if both the petitioner and respondent in a family law case appeared as self-represented litigants, this would cause duplicative data to be reported when the totals were calculated. To accommodate for this deficiency, a compilation of the data was gathered and sorted to identify the duplicate entries. These cases were eliminated leaving only the accurate data to be analyzed. The sample size was determined to be sufficient due to the homogeneity of the population related to this aspect of the study.

To further identify a sub-population of the larger population, a compilation of data was collected to identify cases filed where self-represented litigants used the self-help center forms program (ICAN!). This population was easily identified because the legal pleadings prepared by this program indicated "ICAN!" at the bottom of each page. Staff were able to identify these filings and log the specific case numbers assigned to the cases such as in Appendix 7. The population size of 25 cases consisted of one hundred percent of those who used the self-help center computer program to prepare

their legal pleadings for filing. This sample was easily identified due to the limited number of litigants who actually used the self-help center for document preparation. Data collection for this portion of the evaluation took place between July 15, 2003 and November 15, 2003.

Court Efficiency

A quantitative analysis was performed to arrive at a conclusion regarding court efficiency. Court efficiency was measured in time spent by court personnel reviewing and processing legal pleadings, the number of continuances, and staff impressions regarding court efficiency between the population groups.

With both populations identified, a time study began that involved the staff who accepted new family law filings to determine court efficiency. As each case was filed, the filing window staff timed the length of the transaction. The size of this data included twenty cases filed using the self-help center forms program and twenty cases filed without using the forms program. Data collection took place between July 15, 2003 and November 15, 2003. The data was compiled using central tendency as a descriptive approach to analyzing the amount of time spent with each new filing.

An examination was then conducted into the two populations to determine the number of initial continuances of court hearings. The limitation of this aspect of the research is the variety of reasons that cases are continued, but initial hearings are usually continued due to procedural deficiencies. A systematic random sampling of cases in each population enabled the accounting of continuances. Central tendency was used to evaluate this data and correlate it to the use of the self-help center.

Data from those who used the self-help center and those that did not was collected and examined. By considering the time study in relation to the population, a

comparison was made to arrive at a causal conclusion regarding the relationship between the self-help center and court efficiency.

The second aspect in the analysis of court efficiency was to determine if the needs of the court were being met. This was done in the form of a qualitative design. Impressions from staff regarding the accuracy of documents filed were measured through the use of a survey. This was the most beneficial instrument to use for this analysis because of the limited time available to the staff. A pre-test of this instrument was conducted with staff from other court locations so as not to influence court staff in Long Beach. As a result of the pre-test, the questions were clarified and made more specific to solicit the responses necessary for this analysis. In this survey as indicated in Appendix 2, opinion questions were used to solicit how staff perceived the accuracy of legal pleadings filed from those using the self-help center and those who did not. The size of the data collection consisted of only five court employees, but this data proved to be reliable as these individuals were the first contact when documents were submitted. The response rate was one hundred percent and provided a complete reflection of staff impressions regarding accuracy. Data collection took two weeks due to scheduling issues and ensuring that there was a one hundred percent response rate. A descriptive approach was used as a means to compile data from the employees. This allowed a comparison of cases processed using the self-help center versus the cases processed not using the self-help center. Further, comments were solicited from each employee to develop recommendations that could improve the existing self-help center.

A study of how prepared self-represented litigants were when they appeared in court took the form of a qualitative design as well. A survey was developed as the most effective means of soliciting responses from busy judicial officers and courtroom staff to

determining litigants' preparation for court hearings. A pretest of this survey was conducted at other courthouse locations and resulted in narrowing the questions to obtain specific, measurable responses. The size of this data was limited to two judicial officers and four courtroom employees, but due to the one hundred percent response rate this sample represents each case filed in the Long Beach Courthouse. Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the data collected and responses elicited. This enabled a correlational evaluation of judicial officer and staff impressions of self-represented litigant readiness to proceed for hearings among litigants who used the self-help center and litigants who did not.

Customer Satisfaction

The focus of the project then addressed the family service needs of the community and to what extent customers were satisfied with the self-help center meeting those needs. A qualitative design was used in the form of a survey soliciting responses from self-represented litigants using the self-help center. In the design of the survey, it was important to measure the performance of the self-help center as it related to the Trial Court Performance Standards. Customer satisfaction was measured in several areas including access to justice and public trust and confidence. Prior to implementation, a pretest was conducted on this instrument with non-court related people. Since this survey was supposed to measure the level of satisfaction with the Long Beach Self-Help Center, it was necessary to obtain comments from individuals who had no court experience, thus ensuring the simplicity of completing the survey and the absence of legal jargon. Minor modifications were made to the survey gathering more information about the participants prior to implementation.

The source of the population for this area of research was self-represented litigants who used the Long Beach Self-Help Center. There were a total of fifty surveys completed as reflected in Appendix 1. This represented all individuals who used the center with the exception of four parties (eight percent of the population). A law librarian worked in the location of the self-help center and ensured that those using the center also completed the survey. Further, a court employee was also used to ensure that self-represented litigants using the center completed the survey. Data collection was gathered from July 15, 2003 through November 15, 2003. Once the data was collected from this group of respondents an ordinal measurement was performed, as well as the use of central tendency, to measure responses to specific questions. The final portion of the survey asked an open-ended question to solicit responses from self-represented litigants regarding improvements that could be made to the self-help center. This data was compiled in a descriptive format and categorized into areas of requests for services.

Public Trust and Confidence

Trust and confidence are perceptions that people have regarding the justice system's responsiveness, accountability, and fairness. The use of surveys such as in Appendix 1 were administered to measure the public's level of trust and confidence in the system after using the self-help center. Ordinal ranking of the data was done to determine the level of trust and confidence that the public had in the system as well as with the judicial officer's perceptions of public attitudes. Correlational statistics were used to analyze the data collected as it relates to the questions asked and the relationship to the public's trust and confidence in the judicial system.

Access to Justice

This category dealt with both public perception of access, as well as the physical aspects, that proved that there was or was not access to justice. Many of the questions in Appendix 1 went to the aspect of access to justice. Responses solicited directly from participants allowed for direct feedback instead of inferences drawn from employee comments and perceptions. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the answers from the customers' surveys and provide numerical significance to the responses. Since the primary source of obtaining this data came from customers, the data was presumed to be reliable and significant.

Customer Expectations

This area of measurement came directly from customer responses in Appendix 1. As the responses in this category were descriptive, the measurement of the data was also descriptive. Expectations of customers were taken as a tool to gain insight into areas that were not addressed in the self-help center and to provide a quantifiable need for future services. The survey was administered directly to customers who used the self-help center and was considered a reliable source.

Limitations

In this portion of the research there were several assumptions and limitations made. One assumption made was that the self-represented litigants took full advantage of all of the services provided by the self-help center. As the center is completely self-service, there was no individual available to refer them to specific brochures, informational packets, legal referrals or available resources available on the web sites. Further, there was the assumption that those who take advantage of the self-help center services would complete their documentation by accessing the ICAN! system for forms

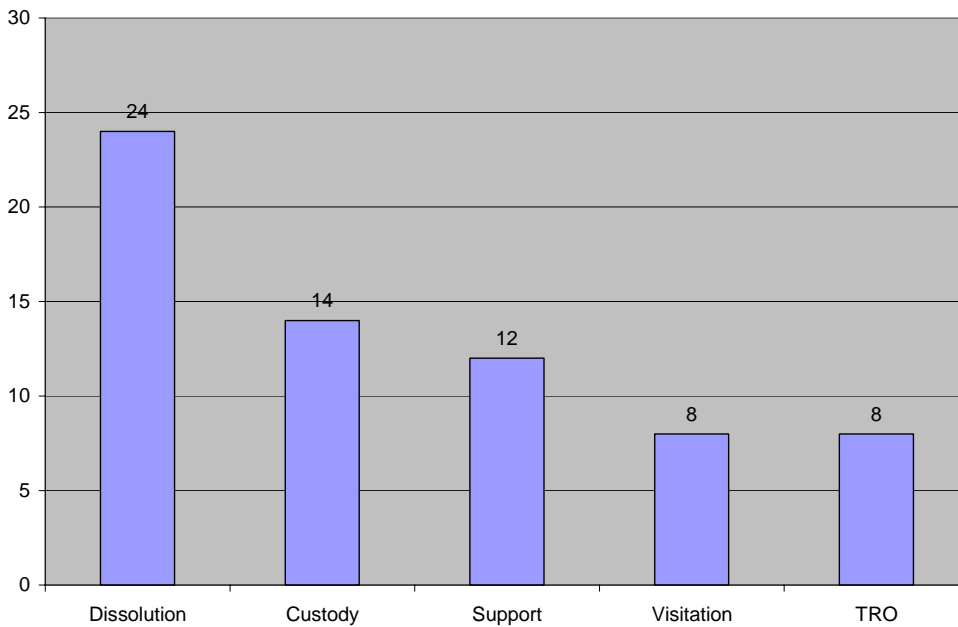
preparation. As the study progressed, there was the realization that there were limitations on the availability of data being gathered. Some individuals came to the self-help center and realizing that it was completely self-service, without staff assistance, left without exploring the services offered. The self-help center experienced severe, recurrent difficulties with technology that precluded self-represented litigants from accessing the web sites for information or using the ICAN! program to complete their legal forms. Problems were corrected and data was gathered from litigants whether the technology programs were functional or not. Though these limitations existed, limited data was gathered to provide a preliminary determination if the needs of the court and the community were being met by the Long Beach Self-Help Center.

FINDINGS

To make a determination if the Long Beach Self-Help Center is meeting the needs of the court and the community, a variety of methods were used to collect data measuring the success of the center. These methods measured hard data, such as specific cases and activities within the cases, as well as soft data consisting of opinions of court personnel, judicial officers, and self-help center users to develop findings.

The self-help center offers several resources in different areas of litigation. The focus of this study addresses the family law issues that the center provides. The first inquiry asked the litigants what they wanted the court to decide. These included the areas of restraining orders, child custody, child visitation, and child or spousal support. Twenty-four respondents indicated in the “other” category, and then they all referred to dissolution as their reason for selecting this category. There were eight litigants who came to the center for a restraining order. Fourteen parties were seeking custody of their children, while eight were seeking to establish or modify child visitation. Twelve respondents indicated that they are requesting the court to decide child and or spousal support. In many of the surveys, they indicated dissolution and one additional category for the court to decide.

Figure 1 - What Do You Want the Court to Decide?



(50 respondents surveyed – 8 indicated Dissolution and one other category.)

It was apparent that dissolution was the reason why most of the litigants used the self-help center, but some also included custody, visitation and support as part of their dissolution request.

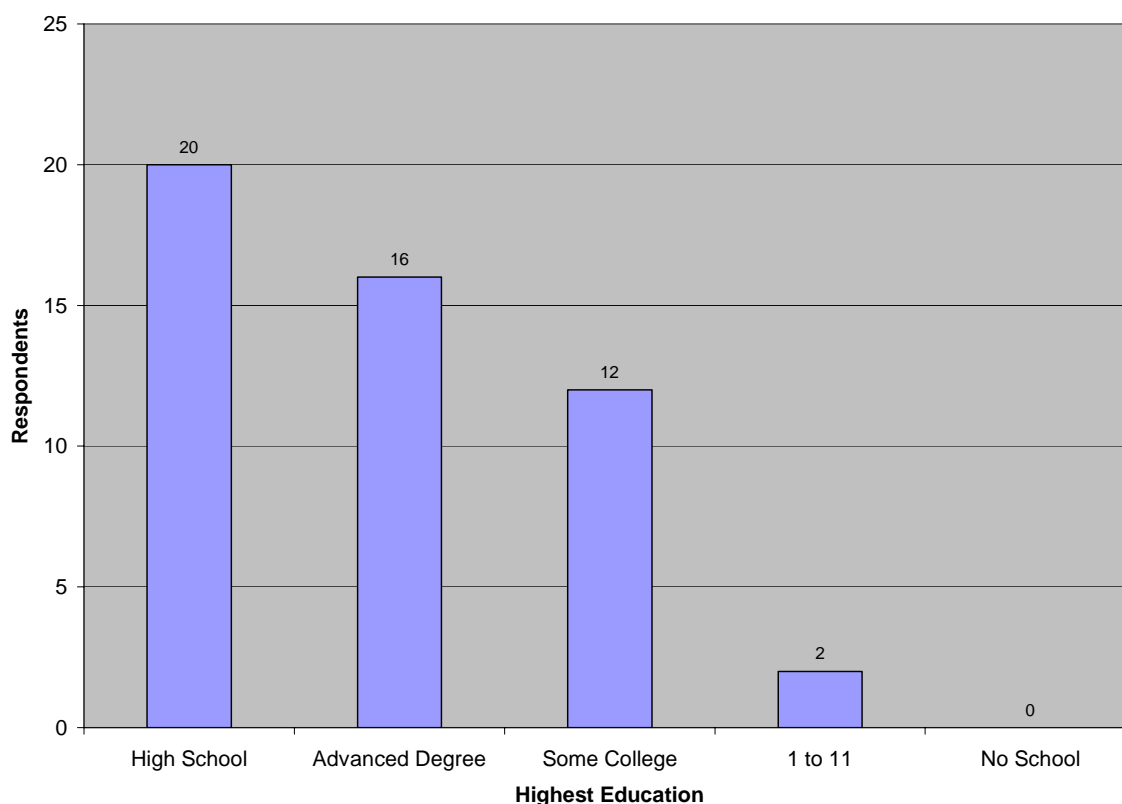
To establish the way that self-help services are provided to self-represented litigants, demographic information was collected on each of the respondents. The first question asked the respondents to identify their gender. There were sixteen males and thirty-four females who used the self-help center.

A majority of the self-help resources available in the center are offered in English and Spanish. The ability to reach other populations of the community requires that these services also be provided in alternate languages. Of those who responded to the survey, forty-four indicated that their primary language is English and six indicated that

their primary language is Spanish. Long Beach has a large population of Cambodian residents, yet the surveys did not produce this as a response.

When developing many of the self-help flyers, informational brochures and web sites, they must be written at a level to ensure that those who use the center will be able to understand the instructions. To determine the education level of litigants who use the self-help center in Long Beach, the survey asked what was the highest level of education of the respondents. Two respondents indicated that they completed up to the 11th grade. Twenty respondents indicated that they completed high school. Twelve respondents had some level of college education, and sixteen indicated that they completed college or had obtained some other type of advanced degree.

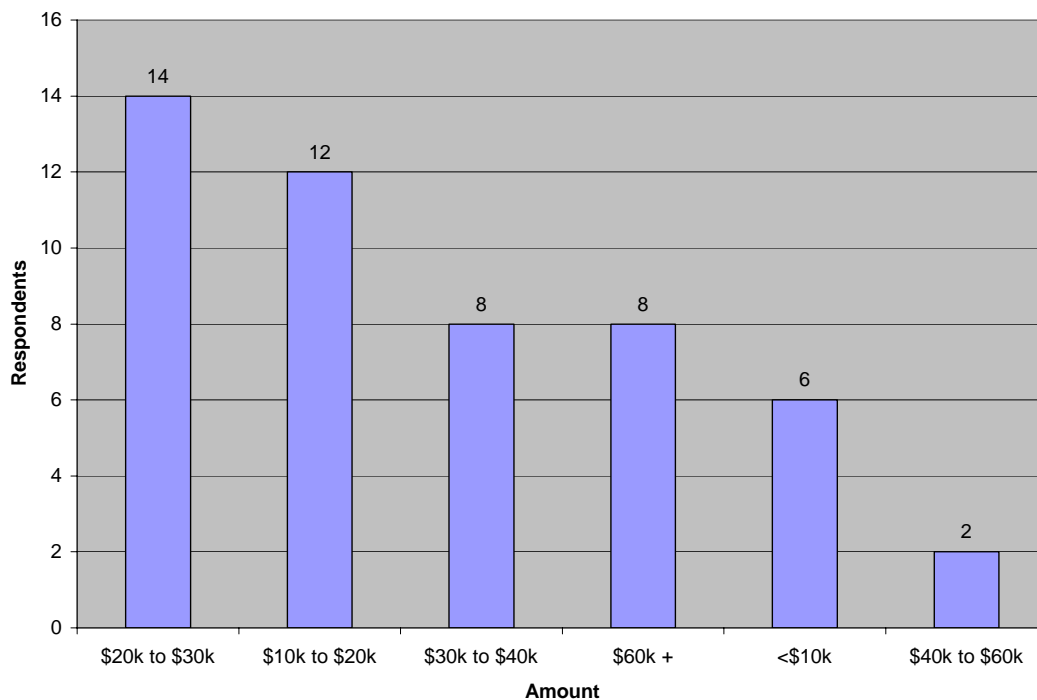
Figure 2 - Education Level of Respondents



(50 respondents surveyed)

Income level also affects the way that services are offered in the self-help center. Litigants with larger incomes may need additional resources that could be provided, such as more in depth property division instructions or other areas that those with smaller incomes would not need to address. Also, if data indicated that a majority of respondents had lower incomes, more services could be focused on programs that could assist in child or spousal support collection or referrals to other governmental resources that provide assistance. Litigants using the center were surveyed regarding their income level. Six responded that they make under \$10,000 per year. Twelve indicated that they make between \$10,001 and \$20,000 and fourteen indicated an income level of \$20,001 to \$30,000. Eight respondents indicated that they make between \$30,001 and \$40,000. Two indicated an income level of \$40,001 to \$60,000 and eight reported making over \$60,000 per year.

Figure 3 - Income Levels



(50 respondents surveyed)

Of those who indicated that their income was under \$10,000 per year, they also indicated that they were receiving some type of governmental aid. Four who responded that they received Social Security Benefits, four responded that they were on AFDC (Aid for Families and Dependent Children), and four responded that they received food stamps.

With this demographic information as well as information regarding customer satisfaction with the services offered, the self-help center can be designed to better meet the needs of the court and community.

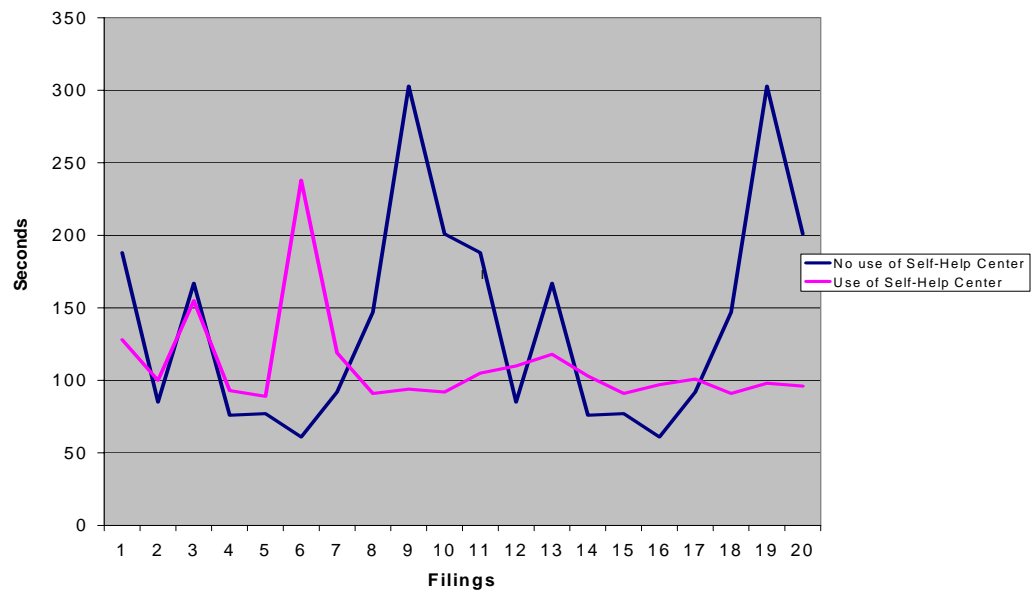
Population Identification

To identify the size of the population that was to be examined it was necessary to solicit the help of the Information and Technology Bureau of the Los Angeles Superior Court. This group assisted in identifying the number of self-represented litigants between the dates of July 15, 2003 and November 15, 2003. A total of 691 petitioners and 27 respondents were found to be self-represented in family law cases. There was duplication of seventeen cases for the petitioners and respondents who were self-represented, therefore netting a total of 674 cases filed by petitioners who were self-represented and 27 respondents. To determine the difference between the control group (those that did not access the self-help center) and the experimental group (those that did access the self-help center), the filing window staff compiled a list of cases that were identified as being produced in the self-help center through the ICAN! system. Twenty-five cases prepared by the ICAN! system were identified from July 15, 2003 through November 15, 2003. The identification of this information was necessary to determine the population and sample size to be examined.

Court Efficiency

One way to measure the benefits of the self-help center from the court's prospective is the reduction in time that court staff takes to process documents. The filing window encounters much of the delay because forms are completed incorrectly or incompletely. A time study was undertaken to determine the amount of time that the filing window examiner spends on each Order to Show Cause filed in family law cases. Two groups were examined, those who did not use the ICAN! system to complete their paperwork and those who did. Of those who did not use the ICAN! system, there were twenty cases studied. The average time for the filing window examiner to process the filing was two minutes and twenty seconds. The longest filing took five minutes and three seconds, while the shortest claim took one minute, one second. The filings presented that used the self-help center ICAN! system reported shorter processing times. Twenty cases were also examined in this group. The average amount of time that the filing window examiner spent on an Order to Show Cause filing was one minute, fifty seconds. The longest filing took three minutes, forty-eight seconds whereas the shortest filing took one minute, twenty-nine seconds.

Figure 4 - Time Spent Processing Documents



(20 respondents from each group measured.)

Continuances

To determine the effects of the self-help center on the time the courtroom spends with each case, a continuance study was conducted. In some cases, when the parties appear before the court, the case must be continued due to procedural inadequacies, such as failure to give required notice or the proper documentation has not been prepared. In a study of cases that had court hearings from their filings filed between July 15, 2003 and November 15, 2003, only ten cases were set for an initial hearing. Of these cases, two required a continuance due to procedural deficiencies. This represents 20 percent of the population that is consistent with the larger population examined from other time periods. Of these cases that made it to court for their initial hearing, none of them had attended the self-help center for assistance or document preparation. It is important to note that the size limitation of the study may affect the results of the evaluation.

Opinions of Court Staff

An important aspect of the evaluation of the self-help center is the opinion of court staff. They were surveyed to evaluate their opinion of the performance of the self-help center as well as requested to offer additional suggestions for services. One of the goals of the self-help center is to enable the litigants to fully complete their documents. When the staff who receive these documents were surveyed regarding if documents were filled out completely, there was one response indicating that it always happens, four responses that it happens most times and three responses that it happens sometimes. No staff indicated that forms were filled out completely, rarely, or never.

The benefit of the self-help center is that it provides litigants with information that allows them to complete their documentation with the correct information. Much of the time spent by the filing window examiner is ensuring that the information placed on the documents is correct, such as name, address, case number, etc. In a survey taken by court staff, there were five responses indicating that forms were mostly filled out correctly and three responses indicating that information is sometimes filled out correctly. There were no responses indicating that documentation was always, rarely, or never filled out correctly.

Often with long lines, speed and efficiency are areas where managers are looking to improve. Through use of the self-help center, litigants were able to complete documents correctly and completely, thus allowing increased processing by filing clerks. When surveyed, four employees indicated that they are able to process their work more quickly and efficiently most of the time and four indicated that they sometimes are able to process the work more quickly and efficiently from those who have utilized the self-help center.

Customer Satisfaction

Modifications that are made to the self-help center will be developed based on comments heard from staff by litigants regarding needed services. Court employees were surveyed to determine if they heard any positive or negative comments regarding the center and what the comments referenced. Five staff members indicated that they had heard comments regarding the center and three had not had any feedback. Of the comments that were conveyed, four indicated that people were dissatisfied with the hours of the self-help center. One person commented that they appreciate that assistance was also available in Spanish and four commented that they appreciated having a reference center that was very helpful.

Continually looking to improve upon the self-help center will make it a valuable resource for litigants. Court employees are in a position to identify areas where there are continuous mistakes or areas where litigants need more information. The survey asked employees what more could be offered in the self-help center that could assist people in completing their paperwork. Four responded that assistance with civil harassment cases was needed. Two responded that assistance with judgment preparation would be extremely helpful in family law cases. Extended hours were indicated in all eight surveys. All eight parties responding also indicated that the computers in the self-help center have to work if litigants are to use the center. Two of the surveys indicated that litigants need a step-by-step sample of how a family law case proceeds. One suggested that a flow-chart would also assist in guiding litigants through their case.

Each judicial officer was questioned regarding any comments that they may have heard regarding the self-help center. Neither had heard any comments regarding the

center, but both indicated that they like to have the center as a resource to send litigants who need assistance.

Public Trust and Confidence

In addition to the services provided by the self-help center regarding document preparation, informing litigants about what to expect at their court hearings is also available. Employees must deal with many of these litigants during court proceedings and were solicited for their opinions regarding the preparation of litigants for their hearings. One employee indicated that litigants are mostly prepared now for their hearings since using the self-help center and three responded that they are sometimes prepared.

There are two judicial officers for the Long Beach courthouse who handle family law matters. Their opinions regarding the services provided and the needs of the litigants assist in developing new and enhanced programs for the self-help center. Each judicial officer participated in a survey that provides more information regarding the services and effectiveness of the self-help center.

Document preparation at the self-help center is one of the key assets of the center. The importance of documents being completed thoroughly is essential to the judicial officers making informed decisions. When surveyed how often pleadings prepared at the self-help center are more thorough than those that are not, both responded that this occurs sometimes. Each further expounded that they need specific details and facts about the situation. One judicial officer commented that he must have the, who, what, how, where and why of each situation to make an informed decision in family law cases.

As a measurement of the public's trust and confidence in the legal process, one of the goals of the self-help center is to educate litigants on court procedure. The belief is that if litigants are better educated in the court process, they will understand their case or issue better, as well as the options available to them when pursuing their case. This understanding of their case or specific issue was the focus of one of the questions in the survey. Forty-two litigants responded that they understood their own case or issue better. Eight responded that they did not understand their case or issue better after using the self-help center than they did prior to using it.

If litigants understand their case or issue better through information obtained at the self-help center, they may feel that they can present their case to the judge in a more competent manner. This self-confidence would be reflected in how a litigant presents his/her case to the court and what expectations they have of the court. When surveyed if litigants felt that they could present their case better to the judge after using the self-help center, forty responded positively whereas ten responded negatively.

The information provided by the self-help center not only explains options for litigants, but also explains court procedure. Many litigants know how they want the case to be resolved, but do not know the process to make this happen. Understanding court procedures is what a majority of the handouts, self-help web sites and workshops are trying to convey. When litigants were surveyed regarding their understanding of court procedures, thirty-four indicated that they did understand the process better and sixteen responded that they did not understand court procedures better than they did prior to using the self-help center.

A goal of the self-help center is to help people get the information they need to present their case to the court, but also to return to the self-help center for further

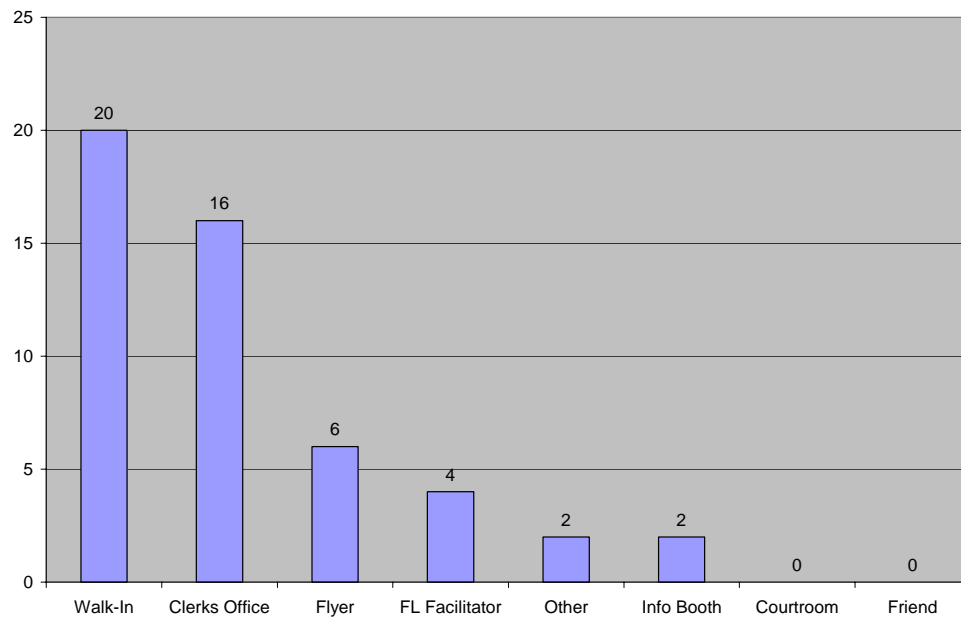
information on issues as the case develops. In family law cases, litigants make numerous appearances before the court when dealing with child custody, support and visitation issues. Litigants were surveyed if they were likely to access the self-help center again. One hundred percent of the litigants surveyed (50) indicated that they would use the self-help center again to obtain information regarding their case.

Access to Justice

Preparation for court hearings is also an aspect of the self-help center. If litigants know how to present their case and what to reasonably expect the court to order, the proceedings will be more efficient and productive. The judicial officers were surveyed regarding this aspect and each said that sometimes parties appear more prepared for their hearings than they previously had. Both judicial officers indicate that this is an on-going process that should be explained to customers and continually enhanced.

The self-help center is located on the fifth floor within the law library. To determine if litigants had easy access to the center, it was necessary to establish where they found out about the center. There were sixteen litigants who responded that they were informed of the self-help center from the clerk's office. Two litigants found out from the information booth. Twenty litigants found the center by going to the law library to research their own issues. Flyers were posted throughout the courthouse that resulted in six litigants going to the center. Referrals were also a source of reference from other programs. The Family Law Facilitator referred four people and the Legal Aid clinic referred two people. There were no referrals from the judges, courtroom staff or from friends/relatives. The following graph represents how the population was referred to self-help center.

Figure 5 - Self Help Center Referrals



(50 respondents surveyed.)

The location of the self-help center has been a concern. It was located on the fifth floor away from the clerk's office where many of the people start their family law proceedings. This was due to the Law Library partnership allowing for available space. A survey of the litigants who utilized the center resulted in 48 litigants indicating that the self-help center was easy to find. Two litigants indicated that it was not easy to locate.

There were three computers that were made available in the self-help center to assist litigants. One computer provided access to the California Court Self-Help web site. The second provided access to the Los Angeles Superior Court self-help web site. The third computer offered the ICAN! computer program providing litigants the ability to complete their forms on-line for filing. The ability of litigants to use these computers is the key to the functioning of the self-help center. Self-represented litigants were surveyed regarding the ease of the computer programs. Forty-two litigants responded

that the computers were easy to use and eight reported that they had problems using the computer programs.

When developing the self-help center, finding a location within the courthouse was the key aspect that allowed for Long Beach to participate in the overall Los Angeles Superior Court self-help plan. The Long Beach courthouse partnered with the Law Library to allow space for the self-help center. A section of the library was designated the self-help center containing computers, brochure holders and limited space to allow people to write. When litigants were asked if they had enough space to handle their work, forty-six responded that they did have enough space and only four indicated that they did not.

During the evaluation of the self-help center, major problems occurred with the technology. There are three computers located in the self-help center. The computers were only periodically working during this evaluation. From August 21, 2003 through September 15, 2003, the Los Angeles Superior Court's technology group disabled all of the computers due to the Microsoft virus alert regarding the worm blaster virus. Despite security patches being placed on the computers by the technology group, they still felt that these computers could be a source for infection. The court's main computer programs were repaired within a few days, but the computers in the self-help center remained unattended until September 15, 2003. Once the computers in the self-help center were working, the courthouse performed a scheduled power shutdown of the building on September 28, 2003. When the power returned on September 29, 2003, the ICAN! computer would not function, however the informational computers were unaffected. The technology group diagnosed the problem as being electrical. This resulted in being a misdiagnosis once an electrician was called and all of the outlets in

the self-help center were functioning. As of December 23, 2003, the ICAN! computer has not worked. Further, the other two computers providing information to the California Court Self-Help web site and the Los Angeles Superior Court Self-Help web site experienced problems on November 3, 2003 and have not functioned since. The table below represents the times that the computers in the self-help center were functioning properly.

Table 1 Self-Help Computer Operational Times											
Computer	July		August		September		October		November		%
	W	N	W	N	W	N	W	N	W	N	
#1 ICAN!	14	0	14	7	9	13	0	23	0	10	41%
#2 CA Court web site	14	0	14	7	11	11	23	0	0	10	69%
# 3 L.A. web site	14	0	14	7	11	11	23	0	0	10	69%

- W = Days computers were working
- N = Days computers were not working
- % = Percentage of time computers were operational

Customer Expectations

The survey given to self-represented litigants who used the self-help center measured a variety of areas to help conclude if the center was meeting the expectations of the community. This survey measured access to justice, trust and confidence in the judicial system, and solicited suggestions for improvements or additions to the self-help center. A variety of demographic information was also gathered to further identify litigants using the self-help center.

The concept of a self-help center was unique to the Long Beach Courthouse. The reference material and computer programs were based on other self-help centers that were in operation throughout the county of Los Angeles. Litigants who used the

self-help center were surveyed to determine if the center provided all of the information that the litigant needed. If there were areas that needed further informational packets, instructions, or references, these services would be added to address the need. The survey indicated that 42 litigants felt that they received all of the information that they needed from the self-help center. Eight responded that they did not receive all the required information that they were seeking. Responses to requests for further services were addressed later in the survey.

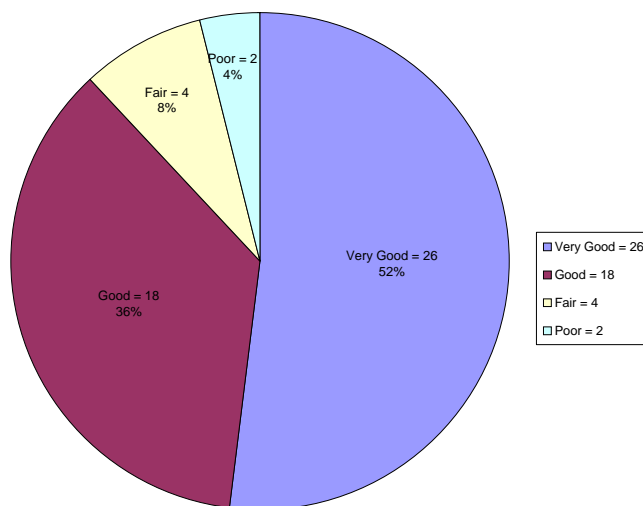
The Long Beach Courthouse was the first courthouse in the county to attempt this new type of self-help center. The center is completely self-service, with no staff, but depends on technology and handouts for litigants to help themselves. When litigants were surveyed, 44 responded that they needed someone to personally help them. Six litigants responded that they were able to navigate the self-help center without assistance.

When questioned if there was anything more that could be offered at the self-help center, the judicial officers had a few suggestions. The preparation of declarations in support of a requested order needed to be more thorough. Parties that appear before the court for their final judgment often do not know how to prepare the judgment. Both judicial officers thought that if litigants could get assistance preparing their judgments, the cases would conclude much quicker. Each judicial officer also felt that there was a need for assistance with civil harassment petitions. Long Beach is one of the highest volume courts in relation to civil harassment petitions in the county and the parties require assistance to meet the burden of proof required by the judicial officers. There was also a concern that the computers in the self-help center were not functioning properly thus eliminating access to the center. Also, the law library restricted the hours

from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The judicial officers felt that the center should be opened extended hours and that the equipment in the center should operate properly.

One of the key aspects of this research was to determine if the self-help center is meeting the expectations of the litigants who use it. As an alternative to other types of self-help centers, meeting expectations of litigants with the services offered by this center will ensure its continued existence. When surveyed regarding their overall satisfaction with the Long Beach Self-Help Center, twenty-six respondents indicated that their overall satisfaction was very good. Eighteen indicated a good sense of satisfaction with the center. Four responded that they had a fair experience and two had a poor experience using the self-help center.

Figure 6 – Meeting Customer Expectations



(50 respondents surveyed)

The design of this research was to determine if the Long Beach Self-Help Center has met the needs of the court and community. These findings regarding the various aspects of the effectiveness of the self-help center allow for reasonable conclusions to be made.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research provide some insight to preliminarily determine if the self-help center is meeting the needs of the community and the court. However due to the limitation of the data sample, more extensive research covering a greater period of time is necessary to develop an accurate conclusion regarding the center's usefulness. There were many measurements to address specific aspects relating to the needs of respondents, court staff, and judicial officers. This has allowed for the exploration of additional programs and services that could further develop the self-help center and meet the needs of the court and community.

A demographic examination of the parties using the self-help center resulted in a clear identification of how to tailor the services of the self-help center to meet the needs of the community. Though a majority of respondents indicated that they primarily spoke and read English, a smaller group identified themselves as primarily communicating in Spanish. Los Angeles County remains one of the nation's largest counties with 4,084 square miles, an area some 800 square miles larger than the combined area of the states of Delaware and Rhode Island.⁵⁷ The city of Long Beach has the one of the largest Cambodian communities in the county, yet the services and participants do not reflect this demographic.

A primary demographic of the center reflects that respondents have a high school education and make between \$20,000 and \$30,000 each year. This information is helpful to create services that will likely help this population. Basic forms to complete with instructions would be sufficient to deal with a majority of family law issues. Instead

⁵⁷ L.A. County Online, <http://lacounty.info.overview.htm>, Jan 2003.

of focusing on property division and estate planning, more energy could be used to address more basic family law issues.

There were five areas of measurement implemented that were used in determining conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the center: court efficiency, customer satisfaction, public trust and confidence, access to justice, and customer expectations. Each provided a clear understanding of how the services of the self-help center were working.

When measuring court efficiency, saving time was identified as assisting the operation in becoming more efficient. Thirty seconds was saved from each person who utilized the self-help center. When servicing at least fifty customers daily, this can prove to be a considerable savings of time that can be otherwise used when there are eight clerks filing documents. Twenty percent of cases that did not use the center had to be continued once they appeared in court due to procedural problems. Court staff felt that parties that used the center were able to prepare their paperwork more correctly and completely. When looking at these issues concerning court efficiency, the self-help center is making progress to ensure that paperwork is done correctly and staff can process the information more efficiently. Without this resource, there would continue to be delays in the courtroom and the clerical offices.

Customer satisfaction was measured to identify if the services provided are adequate and what other services should be addressed. Clerical employees heard positive comments regarding the center and benefit from having the center as a resource for customers. A majority of customers were satisfied with the services that the center offered.

To determine public trust and confidence in the judicial system, the opinions of the public, employees, and judicial officers were solicited. The National Center for State Courts concluded their study finding that that one of the major barriers to pro se litigants was the courts own administrative and procedural complexities.⁵⁸ Litigants who used the center were more prepared for their hearings by understanding the limits of the court and how to request what they wanted. Each understood their case better and how the judicial system works for a decision to be made.

The location of the self-help center and the contents directly affects the access to justice concept that the court identified as needing to improve. The location of the center is a good location, but minor modifications need to be addressed to provide people the access needed to utilize all of the services that are offered. Litigants are referred to the center from different sources that can be better utilized to increase attendance. Technology issues plagued the center during this evaluation, but litigants overwhelmingly agreed that the services offered by the web sites provided them with the information they need to pursue their case.

The final measurement was customer expectations. Eighty-four percent indicated that they obtained all of the information that they needed to pursue their case. Technology issues and restricted hours proved difficult to accommodate as many people that could have used the center. The center appears to have met a majority of customer expectations. Sixty-eight percent indicated that they had a positive experience with the Long Beach Self-Help Center.

This evaluation has measured court efficiency, customer satisfaction, public trust and confidence, access to justice and customer expectations. The self-help center in

⁵⁸ Dent College of Law, Institute of Design and National Center for State Courts, "Access to Justices: Meeting the Needs of Self-Represented Litigants," 1999-2003, www.ncsconline.org/WC/Publications, 8.

the Long Beach Courthouse has met many of these goals. Customers are more confident in the court system and provided with adequate information. The court benefits from the center by more efficiently utilizing court time and staffing. With modifications to the self-help program, full realization of the benefits will continue to develop.

Recommendations

The self-help program in Long Beach has areas that need improvement to better meet the needs of the court and community. As the law library faces increasing financial difficulties, it is probable that the hours will not expand to meet the hours of the court or the needs of the litigants. It is strongly recommended that an alternate location for the self-help center be located that would enable the center to remain open during court hours to meet the needs of the court and the community.

When customer satisfaction was addressed, suggestions were solicited from litigants, clerical employees, and judicial officers. Some of the easiest improvements that can be made to the center include:

- Instructions and information regarding civil harassment cases
- Dissolution judgment preparation handouts and assistance
- Step-by-step samples on how paperwork should be completed
- Flow charts to explain the court process for different types of proceedings

One significant improvement would be to have a staff member located in the center to assist litigants with technology, guide customers to resources and file documents. As this research and many others have indicated, the court benefits from litigants using the self-help center through savings of time in clerical offices and in the

courtroom. Simple guidance in using a computer or obtaining specific brochures would benefit the litigant and increase customer satisfaction significantly.

An increased level of support is required from the Los Angeles Superior Court technology staff. It is apparent that the self-help center has not been made a priority issue for this department, though it affects so many other departments within the court. This type of program cannot go forward without a commitment from this group for support. Judges and administrators should make it known to the technology department the importance of functioning programs and hardware and its relationship to court proceedings. Expansion of technology within the self-help center should be curtailed until a commitment can be made for adequate support. To supplement the lack of working technology, increased informational and instructional materials can be provided for different areas of litigation.

Litigants, judicial officers, and court staff all realize the tremendous benefits of the self-help center in Long Beach. These findings demonstrate the satisfaction that each group has with the center. There were major barriers to the success of the center that adversely affected the results such as technology problems and reduction of access by the law library. If this evaluation were to be conducted again, a more extensive timeframe would be beneficial. The lack of a significant sample size may have affected some of the results of the study. Perhaps a yearly evaluation would be more appropriate to enable some of the problems to appear not so significant.

This research should act as a stepping-stone for future research into self-service, self-help programs. Many positive aspects regarding the center were identified such as workshops, videos, and informational flyers. These are areas that have proven to work both here in the Long Beach Courthouse as well as other courts throughout the country.

Suggestions by staff, judicial officers, and litigants have indicated additional services that would benefit the court even more. The importance of gaining support from every department or organization involved in the self-help center has also been demonstrated as being crucial. With support from these resources, problems experienced in this research would not repeat. Future research is needed in every program to effectively determine if it is worth the amount of investment. Every indication demonstrates the benefits of self-help centers. Perhaps modification to what is contained within each center to meet the needs of the court and community is the key to the success of future centers.

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Appendix 1

Self Help Center Survey

1. What do you want the court to decide?

<input type="checkbox"/> (8)	<input type="checkbox"/> (14)	<input type="checkbox"/> (8)	<input type="checkbox"/> (12)	<input type="checkbox"/> (24)
Restraining	Custody	Visitation	Child/Spousal	Other
Order			Support	

2. How did you hear about the Long Beach Self Help Center?

<input type="checkbox"/> (16) Clerk's office	<input type="checkbox"/> (0) Judge/Courtroom
<input type="checkbox"/> (2) Information Booth	<input type="checkbox"/> (4) Family Law Facilitator
<input type="checkbox"/> (20) Walk-in	<input type="checkbox"/> (0) Friend/Relative
<input type="checkbox"/> (6) Flyer	<input type="checkbox"/> (2) Other: _____

3. Was the Long Beach Self Help Center easy to find?

☐ (48) Yes ☐ (2) No

4. Were you able to get all of the information that you needed from the Long Beach Self Help Center?

☐ (42) Yes ☐ (8) No

5. Did you need someone to help you in the Long Beach Self Help Center?

☐ (44) Yes ☐ (6) No

6. Were the computer programs easy to use?

☐ (42) Yes ☐ (8) No

7. Did you have enough space to do your work?

☐ (46) Yes ☐ (4) No

8. After using the Long Beach Self Help Center, do you feel that you understand your case or issue better?

☐ (42) Yes ☐ (8) No

9. After using the Long Beach Self Help Center, do you feel that you can present your case better to the judge?

☐ (40) Yes ☐ (10) No

10. Did the information you received at the Long Beach Self Help Center help you to understand court procedures better?

☐ (34) Yes ☐ (16) No

11. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the Long Beach Self Help Center?

☐ (26) ☐ (18) ☐ (4) ☐ (2)
Very Good Good Fair Poor

12. Are you likely to use the Long Beach Self Help Center again?

☐ (50) Yes ☐ (0) No

13. What additional services would you like at the Long Beach Self Help Center?

-----**Demographic Information**-----

Gender: ☐ (16) Male ☐ (34) Female

What is your primary language? (44) English (6) Spanish

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

☐ (0) no school or kindergarten ☐ (12) some college
☐ (2) grades 1 to 11 ☐ (16) college or other degree
☐ (20) high school

What is your total household income?

☐ (6) Under \$10,000 ☐ (8) \$30,001 to \$40,000
☐ (12) \$10,001 to \$20,000 ☐ (2) \$40,001 to \$60,000
☐ (14) \$20,001 to \$30,000 ☐ (8) \$60,001 or more

Do you receive: ☐ (4) SSI & SSP ☐ (4) AFDC, ☐ (4) Food Stamps, ☐ (0) GR or GI

☐ (0) Other: _____

Appendix 2

Self-Help Center Survey for Court Staff

1. After parties use the Long Beach Self Help Center computers, how often do you feel that their documents are filled out completely?

1 Always 4 Mostly 3 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

2. Are the documents filled out with the correct information?

0 Always 5 Mostly 3 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

3. Have you heard any comments regarding the Long Beach Self Help Center, either positively or negatively? 3 No 5 Yes If so, what was said?
-

4. After reviewing the paperwork submitted by parties that use the self-help center, what more do you feel that we could offer in the Long Beach Self Help Center that could assist people in completing their work properly?
-

5. In your opinion, are you able to process documents prepared in the Long Beach Self Help Center more quickly and efficiently, than documents not prepared at the Center?

0 Always 4 Mostly 4 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

6. Courtroom Staff: With the variety of information and services provided by the self-help center, how often do parties now come to court prepared for their hearings?

0 Always 1 Mostly 3 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

Appendix 3

Self-Help Center Judicial Officer Questions

1. How often are pleadings prepared at the Long Beach Self Help Center more thoroughly completed than those that are not?

 0 Always 0 Mostly 2 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

2. How often do parties who have used the Long Beach Self Help Center appear more prepared for their hearing than those who did not?

 0 Always 0 Mostly 2 Sometimes 0 Rarely 0 Never

3. Do you find that you spend less time with parties that have used the Long Beach Self Help Center? 1 Yes 1 No

4. Have you heard any comments regarding the Long Beach Self Help Center, either positively or negatively? 2 No 0 Yes If so, what was said?

5. From a courtroom point of view, is there anything else we could offer in the Long Beach Self Help Center that could assist people in completing their work properly? _____

Appendix 4

opinions	forms	rules	courts	programs	careers	reference	search
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You are here: Families & Children



Families & Children

This section tells you about:

- [Family Law Overview](#)
- [Divorce, Legal Separation & Annulment](#)
- [Custody & Visitation](#)
- [Child & Spousal Support](#)
- [Parentage](#)
- [Adoption](#)
- [Introduction to Juvenile Court](#)
- [Juvenile Dependency \(Abuse & Neglect\)](#)
- [Juvenile Delinquency](#)
- [Emancipation](#)
- [Special Education](#)
- [Guardianship \(Probate Court\)](#)
- [Families & Children Links](#)
- [Families & Children Questions & Answers](#)
- [Families & Children Forms & Instructions](#)

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[Small Claims](#)

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Appendix 5

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Superior Court of California County of Los Angeles website. The browser's address bar shows the URL "http://www.lacourtsonline.org". The website's header features the court's name and a navigation menu with links: Home, About The Court, Court Locations, Search, News & Media, Jury, Appellate, Civil, Small Claims, Family, Probate, Juvenile, Traffic, Criminal, and Mental Health. A sidebar on the left lists various legal topics: Family Law, Overview, Counselor and Evaluator Directory, Judgment Processing Manual, Case Summary, Calendars, Forms, Fees, and Court Rules. The main content area is titled "Family Law Self Help" and includes a paragraph explaining family law, a list of topics under the "Overview" heading, and a paragraph about the Family Law Information Center (FLIC). At the bottom, there are links for more information on FLIC and a link to view the Family Law Services brochure. The footer of the page includes the copyright notice "© 2000, Information Systems and Technology Bureau".

Superior Court of California
County of Los Angeles

Home
About The Court Court Locations Search

LACourtONLINE News & Media Jury Appellate Civil Small Claims Family Probate Juvenile Traffic Criminal Mental Health

Family Law

Overview

Counselor and Evaluator Directory

Judgment Processing Manual

Case Summary

Calendars

Forms

Fees

Court Rules

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Family Law Self Help

Family law is the general term used to refer to the various actions regarding marital relationships and relationships between parents and children, as well as violence between family, friends or acquaintances. These actions are as follows:

Overview

- [Dissolution Of Marriage \(Divorce\)](#)
- [Legal Separation](#)
- [Nullity Of Marriage](#)
- [Summary Dissolution Of Marriage](#)
- [Establishing Parentage \(Paternity\)](#)
- [Petition For Custody And Support Of Minor Children](#)
- [Custody And Visitation](#)
- [Child Support](#)
- [Spousal Support](#)
- [Domestic Violence Restraining Orders](#)
- [Civil Harassment](#)

The Family Law Information Center (FLIC) provides family law information, referral, and assistance to the public. In conjunction with other family law service providers at the court, FLIC provides legal forms and procedural guidance in the following areas: marital dissolution (divorce), legal separation, annulments, summary dissolutions, paternity and domestic violence prevention cases. Within these cases, assistance can be sought in many areas including child custody and visitation, child and spousal support and limited property issues.

For more information on FLIC, click [here](#).

To view the Family Law Services brochure, click [here](#).

Dissolution Of Marriage (Divorce)

Family Law - Self Help

Dissolution Of Marriage (Divorce)



This action can be filed by a married person to end the marital relationship between a husband and wife. Along with restoring the parties to single status, the Court will issue orders for custody and visitation of the minor children of the marriage, child support, spousal support, and confirm or divide community and separate property assets and debts.

Once an action is filed by a Petitioner, the other party, Respondent, must be personally served with specific paperwork. If the Respondent fails to file the necessary responding paperwork within thirty (30) days of service, the Petitioner may request an entry of default. Once the default is entered, the Petitioner can complete the divorce proceeding without the participation of the Respondent.

If the Respondent files the necessary responding paperwork, the case will then proceed as either a contested matter or an uncontested matter. The action is considered contested if the parties are unable to agree on some or all issues and the unresolved issues must be resolved by the Court. The action is considered uncontested if the parties are able to cooperate and agree on all issues outside of Court and the matter can proceed to its conclusion by submitting the necessary signed paperwork for the Court's signature.

For more information, click [here](#).

The ADR - Los Angeles Committee of the Family Law Section of the State Bar of California has created the pamphlet "Options for Divorce in California," providing important information to help select among the alternative options for divorce. The pamphlet may be viewed and printed from this web site by using Adobe Acrobat Reader. If you do not have Adobe Acrobat Reader, you may download the application for free from [Adobe's Web Site](#).

To view the "Options for Divorce in California" pamphlet, click [here](#).

Legal Separation



This action can be filed by a married person who wishes to maintain the marital status but separate and resolve all of other issues of the marriage. The Court will issue orders for custody and visitation of the minor children of the marriage, child support, spousal support, and confirm or award community and separate property assets and debts. If the other party, Respondent, responds to the paperwork and requests a dissolution of marriage, the Court will grant the dissolution of marriage.

Once an action is filed by a Petitioner, the Respondent must be personally served with specific paperwork. If the Respondent fails to file the necessary responding paperwork within thirty (30) days of service, the Petitioner may request an entry of default. Once the default is entered, the Petitioner can complete the legal separation proceeding without the participation of the Respondent.

If the Respondent files the necessary responding paperwork, the case will then proceed as either a contested matter or an uncontested matter. The action is considered contested if the parties are unable to agree on some or all issues and the unresolved issues must be resolved by the Court. The action is considered uncontested if the parties are able to cooperate and agree on all issues outside of Court and the matter can proceed to its conclusion by submitting the necessary signed paperwork for the Court's signature.

For more information, click [here](#).

Nullity Of Marriage



This action can be filed by a married person to restore the parties to the status of unmarried persons, as if they were never married. Certain conditions must be met before the Court will consider the marriage as void or voidable. Regardless of how the case proceeds, the Petitioner, the person who initiated the case, will have the burden to prove to the Court that one of the conditions for nullity has been met before the Court will grant the nullity of marriage. The Court can also issue orders regarding property and debt division, custody and support.

For more information, click [here](#).

Summary Dissolution Of Marriage



This action can be used by a married couple to end the marriage. This action is very limited and can only be used by a married couple which meets the following requirements:

1. The parties have been married less than five (5) years as of the date the action is filed.
2. There are no children together born before or during the marriage, including by adoption, and the Wife, to her knowledge, is not pregnant as of the date the action is filed.
3. Neither party has any interest/ownership in real estate.

The married couple jointly signs the necessary paperwork and the originals are filed with the Court. After waiting six (6) months, either party can file the document requesting that the marriage be ended.

For more information, click [here](#).

Establishing Parentage (Paternity)



This action is filed by an unmarried mother or by an unmarried father who have minor children together. Through this action, the Court will determine paternity (or non-paternity if the father is found not to be the biological father of the minor children), and make custody and visitation as well as child support orders.

Once an action is filed by a Petitioner, the other party, Respondent, must be personally served with specific paperwork. If the Respondent fails to file the necessary responding paperwork within thirty (30) days of service, the Petitioner may request the entry of default. Once the default is entered, the Petitioner can complete the paternity proceeding without the participation of the Respondent.

If the Respondent files the necessary responding paperwork, the case will then proceed as either a contested matter or an uncontested matter. The action is considered contested if the parties are unable to agree on some or all issues and the unresolved issues must be resolved by the Court. The action is considered uncontested if the parties are able to cooperate and agree on all issues outside of Court and the matter can proceed to its conclusion by submitting the necessary signed paperwork for the Court's signature.

For more information, click [here](#).

Petition For Custody And Support Of Minor Children



This action may be filed by married or unmarried parents to obtain custody and support orders without filing a dissolution of marriage/legal separation or nullity action, if the parents of the minor children are married, or without filing an action to establish a parental relationship, if the parents of the minor children are unmarried. This action is limited and can only be used in certain situations by a married or unmarried parent. This action does not deal with property or marital status, if the parents are married, or establish a parental relationship, if the parents are unmarried. To address these other issues, the married parents would need to file an action requesting a dissolution of marriage/legal separation or nullity action. Unmarried parents need to file an action to establish the parental relationship.

For more information, click [here](#).

Custody And Visitation



Before parents can address the issues of custody and visitation of their minor children, there must be an underlying action. If the parents are married, either the mother or the father must first file an action requesting a dissolution of marriage, legal separation, nullity or file the petition for custody and support of minor children's action. If the parents are unmarried, either the mother or the father must file an action to establish the parental relationship or file the petition for custody and support of minor children.

Once an underlying action has been filed, the Court can address the issues of custody and visitation. Further discussion of custody and visitation can be located by referring to the appropriate underlying action.

In Los Angeles County, custody and visitation issues may also be raised through an action initiated by the [Child Support Services Department](#), formally known as the District Attorney's Office - Bureau of Family Support Operations.

For more information, click [here](#).

Parents and Children Together (PACT) is a program designed to help separating and divorcing parents work together more cooperatively and effectively. The goal is to help parents focus on their children's best interests. In special seminars taught at the Court, parents learn how to communicate more positively and parent more effectively. The PACT program also provides information regarding [Family Court Services, mediation](#), and [child custody evaluations](#).

For more information on PACT, click [here](#).

To view the Counselor and Evaluator Directory, click [here](#).

Child Support



Before parents can address the issue of child support, there must be an underlying action. If the parents are married, either the mother or the father must first file an action requesting a dissolution of marriage, legal separation, nullity or file the petition for custody and support of minor children's action. If the parents are unmarried, either the mother or the father must file an action to establish the parental relationship or file the petition for custody and support of minor children. There is no legal obligation to pay child support from one parent to the other until there is a Court order. A Court order is obtained by requesting a hearing.

Once an underlying action has been filed, the Court can address the issue of child support in the underlying action. Further discussion of child support can be located by referring to the appropriate underlying action.

In Los Angeles County, child support issues may also be raised through an action initiated by the [Child Support Services Department](#), formally known as the District Attorney's Office - Bureau of Family Support Operations.

For more information, click [here](#).

The Office of the Family Law Facilitator assists parties with child support, spousal support and health insurance issues. The staff consists of attorneys and paralegals, which will meet with parties individually to attempt to resolve their support issues. The staff does not give legal advice nor does it represent a particular party in an action. There is no confidentiality nor attorney-client relationship created or intended between the office and a party.

For more information on the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, click [here](#).

Spousal Support



Once an underlying action for dissolution of marriage or legal separation has been filed, the Court can address the issue of spousal support in the underlying action. There is no legal obligation to pay spousal support by one parent to another other until there is a Court order. In limited situations, the Court can order spousal support in a nullity action. A Court order is obtained by filing a hearing. Further discussion of spousal support can be located by referring to the appropriate underlying action.

For more information, click [here](#).

For more information on the Office of the Family Law Facilitator, click [here](#).

Domestic Violence Restraining Orders



A restraining order is a Court order issued to prevent the recurrence of acts of abuse by a batterer. Under the Domestic Violence Prevention Act, abuse is defined as any of the following:

1. Intentionally or recklessly causing or attempting to cause bodily injury.
2. Sexual assault.
3. Placing a person in reasonable apprehension of imminent serious bodily injury to that person or to another.
4. Engaging in any behavior that has been or could be enjoined such as molesting, attacking, striking, stalking, threatening, battering, harassing, telephoning, destroying personal property, contacting the other by mail or otherwise, disturbing the peace of the other party.

The act(s) of abuse/violence must be recent, within thirty days, and the batterer must be a spouse, ex-spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, ex-boyfriend/ex-girlfriend, someone with whom the victim has or has had a dating relationship, an immediate family member (mother, father, in-laws, siblings, adult children), or a person with whom a party has a child/ren together. A victim that is a target of abuse but does not have the necessary relationship to the batterer may file a civil harassment restraining order, discussed below.

The restraining order can include the following: restraints on personal conduct by the batterer; orders for the batterer to stay-away from the victim's home/work and/or children's school; orders for the batterer to be removed from the residence; child custody and visitation and support orders and other miscellaneous orders.

For more information, click [here](#).

Civil Harassment



A person who has suffered harassment may seek a civil harassment protective order. Harassment is defined as:

1. Unlawful violence.
2. A credible threat of violence or
3. A knowing and willful course of conduct directed at a specific person that seriously alarms, annoys, or harasses the person and that serves no legitimate purpose.

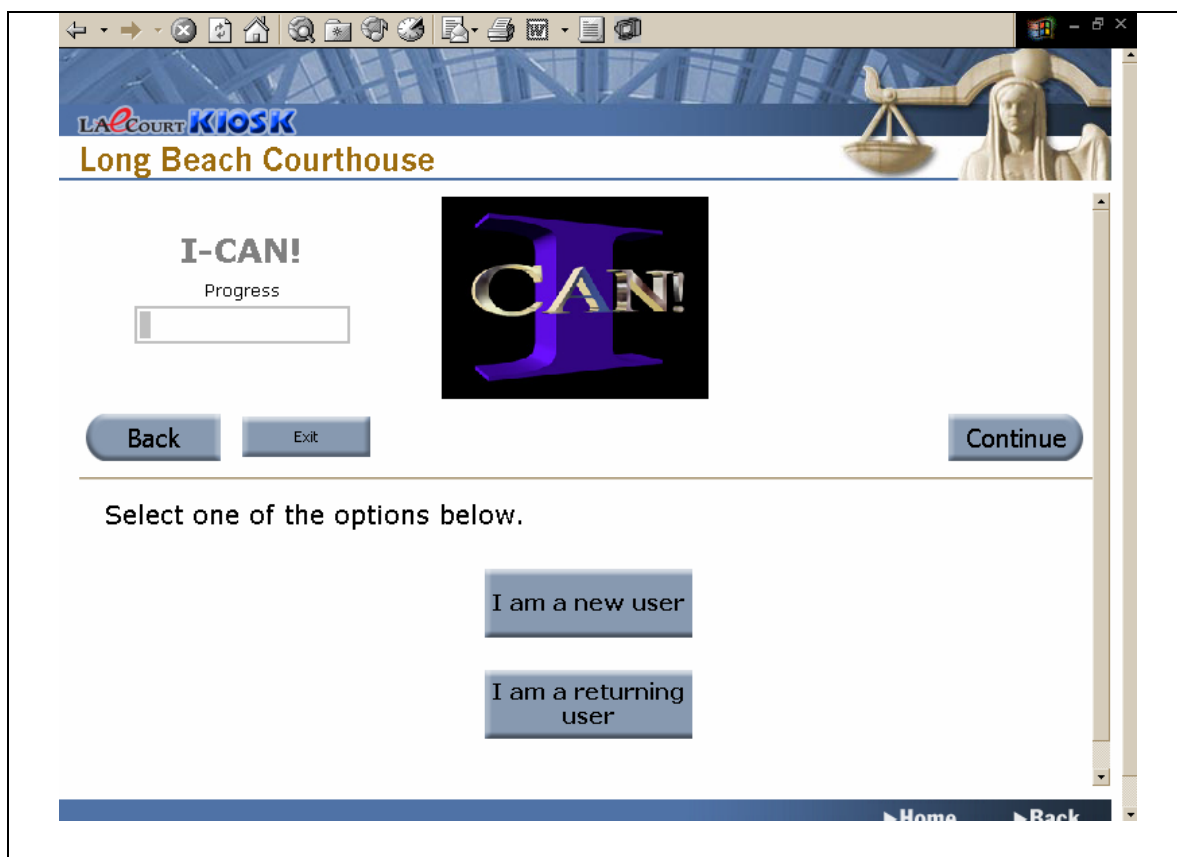
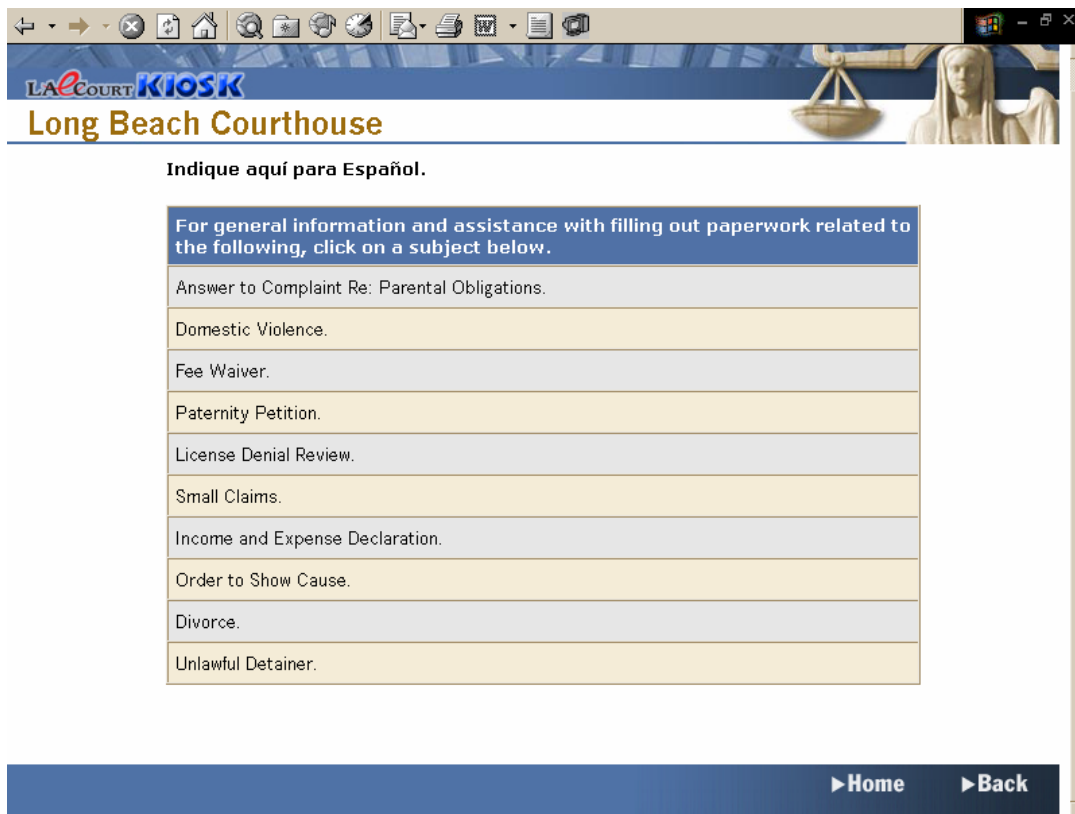
Pursuant to California Code of Civil Procedure § 527.6(b), the course of conduct must be such as would cause a reasonable person to suffer substantial emotional distress and must actually cause substantial emotional distress to the victim.

The restraining order can include restraints on personal conduct by the batterer, order the batterer to stay away from the victim's home/work and/or children's school, and other miscellaneous orders. There is no requirement that there be a relationship between the victim and a batterer in order to obtain the protective order. There must, however, be recent acts of harassment.

For more information, click [here](#).

Appendix 6





Appendix 7

ICAN Forms Log

Date	Case Number	Time Spent	ICAN Form/ Non-ICAN Form
1 Oct 12, 2003	NF004990	2min 13s	ICAN
2 Sept 30, 2003	ND049947	3 min 8s	Non ICAN
3 Sep 30, 2003	NF004974	1 min 25 s	Non ICAN
4 Sep 30, 2003	ND049448	2 min 47s	Non ICAN
5 Sep 30, 2003	NF004975	1min 16s	Non ICAN
6 Sep 30, 2003	ND049449	1 min 22s	Non ICAN
7 Sep 30, 2003	NF004947	1 min 1s	Non ICAN
8 Sep 30, 2003	NF004978	3 min 21s	Non ICAN
9 Sep 30, 2003	ND049452	5 min 3s	Non ICAN

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