



The Impact of the Illinois JusticeCorps Program on the Courts, Court Users and Legal Aid Organizations

Summary Report, August 2015

Background and Program Model

Illinois JusticeCorps (ILJC) is an innovative program through which college and law students serve as guides to make courts across Illinois more welcoming and less intimidating for people without lawyers. ILJC recruits, trains and provides the necessary support for these students to provide procedural and navigational assistance. The program is an important complement to the legal assistance provided by court-based *pro bono* and legal aid programs and the services provided by clerks, law library staff, and other court personnel.

JusticeCorps volunteers or members, identifiable by their blue shirts, effectively serve as docents for people without lawyers by helping them find their way around the courthouse and connecting them with assistance available there, helping them to find and use appropriate online resources, and helping them with referrals to legal aid and other services. Many ILJC members have diverse backgrounds with strong connections to client communities, and they often can provide legal information to people without lawyers in their own languages.

The Chicago Bar Foundation (CBF) launched ILJC as a pilot program in Chicago at the Daley Center in 2009. The initial program expanded in 2012 with AmeriCorps funding from the Serve Illinois Commission and additional funding and in-kind support from the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice. With this additional funding, the program operated in three locations – in Chicago at the Daley Center, in Markham at the Sixth Municipal Courthouse, and in Bloomington at the McLean County Law and Justice Center. In the summer of 2014, the CBF transitioned the administration of the program to the Illinois Bar Foundation (IBF). Since then, the program has expanded into seven additional courthouses across Illinois. The CBF continues to partner with the IBF for the Cook County portion of the program, and the Commission on Access to Justice continues to provide assistance as well.

Evaluation Methods

In December 2014, IBF contracted with Philliber Research & Evaluation to design and conduct an evaluation to provide the program and funders, including the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice and AmeriCorps, with qualitative and quantitative data that demonstrates and measures the impact of the ILJC program. The program intends to use the evaluation to establish best practices and make program improvements.

The primary evaluation activity for this program year, and the focus of this summary report, were interviews with judges, attorneys and other court staff and legal service providers affiliated with 10 Illinois courts in order to gain a greater understanding of the impact of the ILJC program. Court administrators, judges, attorneys and staff members of the courts and legal service provider agencies were interviewed to gather data about the impact of the ILJC program from the perspective of those in the courts and legal community who work most closely with the program. Additional purposes of these interviews were to identify suggestions for program improvement and

to solicit suggestions for other courts considering starting an ILJC program. Twenty-four interviews were conducted by phone in the summer of 2015. Table 1 below describes the court and legal services staff members who participated in the interviews.

Table 1. Court Staff and Legal Service Providers Interviewed

| Court Staff | Number | Courts Represented |
|--------------------------------|-----------|--|
| Court Administrators | 7 | Bloomington, Champaign, Chicago/Daley Center, Edwardsville, Kankakee, Rockford |
| Judges | 6 | Chicago/Daley Center, Edwardsville, Markham, Waukegan, Statewide |
| Circuit Clerks | 2 | Bloomington, Galesburg |
| Law Librarians | 2 | Rockford, Waukegan |
| Legal Service Providers | | |
| Attorneys | 6 | Bloomington, Champaign, Chicago/Daley, Kankakee, Markham |
| Intake Coordinator | 1 | Chicago/Daley Center |
| Total | 24 | |

The evaluators developed an interview protocol that included structured survey items and open-ended questions focused on satisfaction and outcomes related to the ILJC program. The development of the interview protocol was guided by central questions and hypotheses. Quantitative responses on 5-point Likert-type scales were tabulated, and qualitative responses were compiled, coded, and analyzed for emerging themes.

Evaluation Findings

The interview responses and data analysis supports the following evaluation findings.

Familiarity with the JusticeCorps Program

All 24 court-affiliated staff and legal aid providers interviewed were asked to rate their familiarity with the ILJC program. They demonstrated a strong familiarity with the program. On a 5-point scale, 83% rated themselves in the top two categories, *familiar* or *totally familiar*. An additional 17% rated themselves as *somewhat familiar*.

Table 2. Level of Familiarity with JusticeCorps Program

| (n=24) | Not at all | | Somewhat familiar | | Totally Familiar |
|---|------------|----|-------------------|-----|------------------|
| How familiar are you with the JusticeCorps program? | 0% | 0% | 17% | 46% | 37% |

Satisfaction with the JusticeCorps Program

Interviewees were also asked to describe the ways in which they interacted with the ILJC program and members and to rate the quality of these interactions. They described a range of interactions -- from close daily contact (e.g., supervision and training) to more casual interaction and gave high marks to the quality of these interactions. The vast majority (88%) rated their interactions with ILJC members at the top of the 5-point scale, *very positive*. An additional 8% rated these interactions as *positive*, and another 4% (one individual) rated them as *neutral*.

Table 3. Quality of Interactions with JusticeCorps Members

| (n=24) | Not positive at all | | Neutral | | Very positive |
|---|---------------------|----|---------|----|---------------|
| How would you rate your interactions with JusticeCorps members? | 0% | 0% | 4% | 8% | 88% |

Personal Qualities of JusticeCorps Members

Open-ended responses and comments to the question about quality of interactions yielded enthusiastic praise and description of the personal characteristics and work ethic of the ILJC members. They described their commitment and skill in providing valuable services to the court. *“They are so good at interacting with the public and improving the experience of our customers.”* One described encouraging a member to apply for a permanent position in their court, and another described how *“it takes a very specific demeanor to work with self-represented litigants, to be respectful, polite and not get frustrated.”* In only one interview was there a hint of faint praise, when one member’s skills were described as *“good”* and *“coming along.”* In all other interviews, strong and genuine appreciation was expressed through comments that including these adjectives and descriptors:

- *Skilled in interacting with public and with court staff, polite, patient, respectful, professional* – Ten interview participants (42%) made comments like this describing interpersonal skills.
- *Highly competent, smart, top-notch students* – Eight comments (33%) like this were made describing general intelligence and aptitude.
- *Very friendly, positive attitude, upbeat* – There were seven comments (29%) like this emphasizing the importance of attitude and demeanor in addition to skill.
- *Committed, reliable, independent, conscientious* – Six interview participants (25%) made comments like this describing the work ethic of ILJC members.
- *Passionate, dedicated to serving the public, providing valuable service to our court* – Six (25%) also made comments like this describing dedication to service.

Impact on the Courts

The scaled survey responses and qualitative interview data provide evidence that the ILJC program has had a positive impact on court services. Table 4 below summarizes the responses of the 17 court staff interviewed. The narrative following the table discusses evaluation findings that draw from the survey data and qualitative interview questions.

The majority of those interviewed agreed that the program has increased efficiencies within various court departments, improved and expanded existing services, and introduced new services that have resulted in more personalized assistance for self-represented litigants. While all agreed that, as a result of the program, self-represented litigants were filing forms more completely, which saved time for the court clerks and made the litigants better prepared for court proceedings, there was somewhat less agreement that self-represented litigants were thus able to participate effectively in their cases and to have more realistic expectations.

Table 4. Impact of the JusticeCorps Program on the Courts

| The JusticeCorps Program has... (n=17) | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | N/A |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|-----|
| Enabled the court/center to provide more personalized service to self-represented persons. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 29% | 71% | 0 |

| The JusticeCorps Program has... (n=17) | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | N/A |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|-----|
| Increased the capacity of pro bono and legal aid organizations to serve people without attorneys | 0 | 0 | 6% | 29% | 41% | 24% |
| Improved the court's/center's ability to provide services in languages other than English. | 0 | 0 | 18% | 18% | 35% | 29% |
| Improved the completeness and correctness of documents filed by self-represented persons. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 29% | 59% | 12% |
| Resulted in clerks spending less time discussing filing requirements with self-represented persons. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18% | 53% | 29% |
| Resulted in self-represented persons being better prepared for their court proceedings. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 41% | 41% | 18% |
| Improved self-represented persons' ability to participate effectively in their court proceedings. | 0 | 0 | 12% | 29% | 41% | 18% |
| Helped create more realistic expectations in self-represented persons. | 0 | 0 | 35% | 18% | 29% | 18% |

Enhanced quantity and quality of court services - Everyone who participated in the interviews provided multiple examples of how the ILJC program had enhanced the quality or quantity of courthouse services, particularly for *pro se* litigants. As one judge described, *“Both in quality and volume, we are improving our services. Our self- help center can spend more time with people, since there isn’t as much of a backlog of people to help, due to the JC volunteers being there helping out.”* An administrator in a small courthouse described, *“Before we had only one volunteer who worked one half-day per week. Now [due to the ILJC program] we have more.”*

- Increased general information and assistance.** In most of the interviews, court staff and judges described how the ILJC program had increased the amount of general help, directions, and information that was offered at the courthouse. One judge described the value of, *“The little kiosk in the lobby where people could go immediately and be escorted to the right offices on the right floors.”* He continued on to state, *“Before JC program we didn’t have any of this.”* Many court staff described how ILJC members greeting people, answering basic questions, and giving directions was a critical service that increased access to justice and improved service at the courts. At the Chicago/Daley Center, which was described by one judge as *“a huge monster building to navigate,”* ILJC members assist people at multiple entrances, near the security checkpoints, *“where there is a lot of chaos.”* Previously, there was an information desk in the court complex, but ILJC improved the level of service. *“We now have a much enhanced level of customer friendliness and service.”*
- More personalized and friendly service.** Many people described how the ILJC program helped the courts to provide more personalized service. These services often took the form of one-on-one assistance for a court user’s specific legal situation. One judge described how most *pro se* litigants need time to understand the process and get their questions answered. *“This detailed, sit-down time JC volunteers can spend is invaluable.”* *“It seems they have filled a great need in this area.”* Many others described the kindness and friendliness with which the ILJC members interact and offer assistance. One judge described how this friendlier approach really stood out and increased service quality. *“They [ILJC members] actually talk to people. Elsewhere [in the courthouse] they really don’t have the time to talk to people and help them.”*

- **Increased language services.** While language and translation services were already available in the courts, many of those interviewed gave examples of how ILJC members provided enhanced language services that improved quality and access to justice. One administrator described how their full-time ILJC member is bilingual, and that the majority of people she assists every day are Spanish speakers. *“We do have Spanish-speaking staff in the library, but having an additional person with bilingual and bicultural skills has been very helpful.”* At another court, a court administrator described how in their ILJC program, *“Spanish-speaking JC students help Spanish speakers all the time. This is a great thing!”* At another courthouse, a supervisor described how they tried to create the ILJC weekly schedule to *“make sure we have a Spanish and Polish speaker available all the time.”* ILJC members are also trained on using the language line, so even if they are not bilingual themselves, they can still help litigants meet their language needs. One person interviewed described how it would be helpful if some of their ILJC volunteers did speak Spanish: *“We have Spanish-speaking clients, but no Spanish-speaking JC volunteers. We would definitely benefit from that.”* In one interview, when asked to describe a success story involving the ILJC program, a court administrator described the rare event of a court user who only spoke French. *“The JC student took them to the court services department, and found a French speaker, and together they helped him for three hours. It was right at the beginning of the JC program, and I realized then that I love this program.”*
- **Increased assistance with legal forms.** In a majority of the interviews, court staff and judges described how the ILJC program had enhanced the ability of court staff to help *pro se* litigants with understanding and completing their legal documents. One administrator at a small courthouse described, *“Now we have two people in our courthouse, instead of just one, who are available to sit down with and help pro se litigants, which helps a lot.”* Another person described how previously their court had a small desk where litigants without attorneys could go to get help. *“But now all of the JC students in the courthouse can help people with forms. They work with people in the law library and in the court resource center. We really focus on helping people with legal forms.”*
- **Increased assistance for elderly people.** In a large courthouse, one administrator described how the ILJC program had enhanced their work in their Elder Justice Center. *“They [ILJC members] are particularly nice and helpful with older people using the court. They sit and spend time to talk to people and tell them the services available in the court system”*

Increased efficiencies at court clerks’ offices - Most of those interviewed described how court processes were made more efficient due to the general information, directions and quick screening that ILJC members provided in many locations throughout the courthouse. ILJC members were able to provide information and assistance that would often direct people away from the clerk’s office to other more appropriate locations in the courthouse, where they could receive assistance. This led to clerks spending less time answering general questions and explaining filing requirements to litigants. *“It does save the clerks a lot time. Due to the JC program, we can refer people elsewhere in the building.”* Another court administrator described how their clerk’s office worked in conjunction with the ILJC program. *“It lessens time at the counter that I have to spend with unrepresented litigants. It moves the line more quickly. We shuttle them from the counter on to the JC volunteers, who can help them fill out forms or describe their next steps in the process. Before, the clerks had to deal with all these questions. They didn’t have the time and didn’t really know enough to answer their questions. Their job was to file documents.”*

Another efficiency aided by the ILJC program – which will be described further in the section below under increased services -- was in improving the accuracy of court documents filed by *pro se* litigants. One judge described how the ILJC program help people interact more successfully with clerk’s office by helping them understand forms. *“This helps mitigate the difficulty many people have interacting with the clerk’s office.”* Another court administrator described, *“Before the JC program set up an information kiosk in the lobby, people would walk in, go straight to the clerk’s office, and take up all their time. Because of JC program, this no longer happens.”* She continued on to describe that on the few days when their JC volunteer has been out sick, *“You wouldn’t believe the calls I get from the clerk’s office, asking where the JC person is. They really miss them when they are not there.”* She continued to describe how their court has experienced budget and staffing cuts every year for the past four years, and that the clerk’s office has been overwhelmed trying to serve people with a

smaller and smaller number of staff. *“So, when the JC program came in this year, it was a huge help. It has truly been a godsend.”*

Increased services and efficiencies in law libraries and self-help desks - Many of the court staff interviewed described how the ILJC program had helped increase the capacity of courts to serve *pro se* litigants in their law libraries, self-help centers or self-help desks based in the courthouse. One law librarian described how their court had one existing employee, whose job was to help self-represented litigants navigate the on-line legal resources located in the court. He described how with the addition of one ILJC member working in the law library, they significantly increased the amount of time and assistance they could provide to litigants. Further, he described the value of the ILJC member as a colleague for the existing employee, and how they began to share information and learn from one another. Another law librarian described how prior to the ILJC program, he would often receive long and complicated questions from *pro se* litigants, and that this would prevent him from accomplishing his research work. A self-help center attorney described how ILJC members working in his office helped them stay on top of very-high volume – averaging 500 visitors per month – and how the ILJC members also help things run more smoothly between the self-help center and the clerk’s office. *“Having that many people come through our door, it was super useful to have the additional JC help. It allowed us to spend more time and attention to pro se litigants, and do a better job with paperwork. Anecdotally, we’ve noticed that we have fewer errors and fewer complaints coming back from the clerk’s office or from judges.”*

Increased efficiencies during court proceedings - Court administrators and judges at several courthouses also described how the ILJC program has helped to improve efficiency during court hearings by improving the accuracy of legal documents, and by giving the judges a resource to which they can refer litigants. As one court administrator described, *“The judges have been so positive about the JC program. The number of pro se litigants in divorce and small claims are rising all the time. Judges really like that someone can explain the process to them, help them fill out their paperwork, and judges say pro se now come in more prepared.”* ILJC members do not prepare forms for litigants but are able to explain what the form is for, explain the process, answer questions and check for completion. Another explained: *“Judges say documents are filled out better. Most of the people who need help filling out forms are seeking divorces, and they go to the law library where JC members help them complete their forms.”* A court administrator described: *“I know from talking to judges that people were much better prepared for their divorce hearings, and that we also had many fewer hearings because people were prepared with the right documents initially so they didn’t have to come back for an additional hearing.”* One of the judges interviewed described a success story related to the ILJC program, where a Spanish-speaking couple appeared in her courtroom to file for dissolution of marriage. An interpreter was called in to assist and described to the judge that the couple had reached all of their agreements. The judge then sent the couple outside to a nearby office where an ILJC member was available to assist with all of the legal forms that are required. She described how a few hours later the couple was back in the courtroom with all of their forms, and they were divorced in one day. *“This would have never happened without the JC program. It was an efficient use of their time, of the court’s time, it didn’t require them coming back again and again. Most of our divorces take about a year.”*

The addition of new services at the courthouses - Many of the court staff and judges interviewed described how the ILJC program not only enhanced existing services, but also introduced several types of new services at their courthouses. One judge described their value, *“Now we can offer more complete services because JC volunteers are present. I think that these services make people feel better and less apprehensive about their interaction with court system.”*

- **Kiosks and information tables.** Several people interviewed described how their court decided to use their ILJC members to staff new kiosks and information tables to answer questions and provide immediate assistance to people entering the courts. This new type of service was introduced in the large and complex Chicago/Daley Center, as well as in smaller courthouses. *“They provide front-line interaction with the public and pro se litigants at a huge, confusing legal facility where people are most in need of that help. They are providing an invaluable service.”* One judge described how early every morning he would arrive at one of the heavily-trafficked entrances to the court complex, and would see the ILJC members opening up their information kiosk and providing friendly service to court visitors. Another person in a smaller county described how the ILJC program set up and staffed an information table and information easel in the rotunda of the courthouse every day. *“The clerk’s office and judges, who have offices on that floor, will send*

people to them to answer questions all the time. It is good that the JC volunteers are not tucked away in the basement somewhere. They have a central location and are extremely helpful.” Another court administrator described how before the ILJC program began, there was no information kiosk in their courthouse. “The clerk’s office used to be the front line, and my number was first listed, so I got all the phone calls. Or people would walk in, go straight to the clerk’s office, and take up all their time. Because of JC program, this no longer happens.”

- **Escort assistance.** Another new service provided at several courts due to the introduction of the ILJC program was providing escort assistance, accompanying court users to other offices in the building, or even staying with them throughout the various steps they needed to accomplish in their visit to the courthouse. ILJC members provided this service at kiosks and information tables, and also at help desks and legal aid offices located in the courthouse. Several attorneys from legal aid organizations described how important it was to provide this escort assistance to people with physical or cognitive disabilities, who would find it difficult to complete the next steps in their process. “This cuts down on frustration of the pro se litigants. Not knowing where to go is difficult for them. These services are a stress reliever for the pro se litigants.” One attorney described how this service was valuable particularly in larger courts, “We find that litigants get lost between the courtroom and the concourse level and never receive their legal orders.” At the largest site, Chicago/Daley Center, one described “It is a huge monster building to navigate. At the security checkpoint and in the lobby and concourse level, there is lots of chaos. I don’t know what we would do without the JC program at this point.”
- **Assistance with tense situations.** Several court staff described how ILJC members are also trained to help diffuse tense situations that arise with court visitors. In legal self-help centers, in the hallways, and at information kiosks at the Chicago/Daley Center, ILJC members are trained to intervene, listen and calmly assist people who are coming out of offices or court hearings frustrated or angry. Many people are dealing with very stressful situations related to divorce, foreclosures, or evictions. “The JC students are well-trained, and have skills. They know how to be nice, provide help, and de-escalate a situation. In a calm way, JC workers can find someone in legal aid, or in another office in the building, who can actually talk to and help them.”
- **Expansion of service capacity at smaller courts.** While the number of ILJC members assigned to more rural counties is often very small, even one or two individuals can make an impact. One judge described hearing positive stories about the ILJC program from judges in outlying counties, saying “the program can have a big effect in a smaller county because a few new people can make more of a splash. He described how judges are relieved when there are new programs and services added. “It is reassuring to judges that there is some back-up assistance available to help people find their way through the system.” A court administrator described the impact “We are a small jurisdiction, so we don’t have a lot of volunteer resources in the legal arena. By having JC, we can now run an information booth, and fully staff our law library to provide legal assistance, which is something we’ve had a long-term goal for. We have developed new forms, and provided assistance to other departments. JC has filled in the gaps. If JC goes away I don’t know how we’d recreate it.”

Creating a friendlier, more welcoming, and responsive court environment - Several judges and court administrators described how the presence of the ILJC program brought a different attitude and feeling to the courthouse. “They are at the entrance, so are the face of the courthouse. They provide a positive demeanor, and are knowledgeable about where people need to go, and can help people immediately.” One judge described that wearing polo shirts makes the ILJC members more casual and approachable than someone in a uniform. “People don’t want to be in court, so it’s stressful for them to begin with. Having JC volunteers greet them and be nice to them makes them feel more comfortable and enhances the friendliness of the building.” Another judge took a wider view of the friendlier atmosphere and stated, “JC enhances the user-friendly nature of the court system, which tends to be very user-unfriendly. I’ve detected a change in people’s attitudes, now that they are not getting the runaround, and this is just a great thing. It has helped transform, to an incremental degree, our courthouse.”

Impact on Legal Assistance Organizations

The interview data also demonstrates positive outcomes for the legal aid organizations that provide services to *pro se* litigants. These services are housed within the courthouse at self-help centers or self-help desks or sometimes located in separate offices nearby. Both the scaled item responses and open-ended qualitative responses from the interviews indicate that ILJC program has had a positive impact on legal aid entities and their clients.

Every legal service provider interviewed strongly agreed that the ILJC program has improved the flow of clients to their organizations and nearly three quarters (71%) strongly agreed that the program has resulted in their being able to serve more people more efficiently. A majority also strongly agreed that the program has enabled them to provide a more personalized or thorough service to their clients.

Table 5. Impact of the JusticeCorps Program on Legal Assistance Organizations

| The JusticeCorps program has... (n=7) | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree | N/A |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|-----|
| a. Improved client flow to our organization (e.g., people arrive more quickly at the right location for the type of legal help they need). | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100% | 0 |
| b. Increased the capacity of our organization to serve more people more efficiently. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 29% | 71% | 0 |
| c. Improved our organization's ability to provide services in languages other than English. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 43% | 29% | 29% |
| d. Enabled our organization to provide more personalized or more thorough service to clients. | 0 | 0 | 14% | 29% | 57% | 0 |

Helps people connect to legal assistance organizations more quickly - Several interviews described how ILJC members help connect people to outside legal organizations more efficiently. ILJC members working at an information kiosk will ask relevant questions and then direct people to legal aid offices either inside or outside the court complex. ILJC members in court-based legal self-help centers will greet and screen people in order to direct them to the appropriate attorney or desk to meet their need. As one attorney explained, *“There already exists within our county a very vibrant legal assistance community. JC helps pro se litigants connect with the right one of these legal service providers, and at the right time, and in the right continuum of legal assistance.”* This linking not only helps people without attorneys receive the help they need, it also helps the legal assistance organization connect more efficiently with the sector they serve.

Increased efficiencies within legal self-help offices - Many of those interviewed described the positive impact of the ILJC program on self-help centers located within the courts. These self-help centers or self-help desks are often staffed by a combination of court employees and attorneys from outside legal aid organizations. ILJC members working in these centers are often used as front-line staff to increase efficiency and improve the flow of appropriate clients to attorneys. ILJC members answer questions, screen people, and get them started filling out documents. Just as importantly, they also re-direct people away from the legal aid organizations, as necessary. *“They weed out people who don’t need those services by pre-screening, and stop a huge flood of people coming into the legal aid agencies.”* One court administrator reported that ILJC members help facilitate the flow of clients between the court offices and the legal aid organizations, *“JC volunteers manage the flow of those people and make sure they get seen by the pro bono organizations, and that they understand their case.”* A legal aid attorney at one of the many help desks at a large courthouse described how prior to having the ILJC members, they would have to do all the pre-screening themselves. *“A lot of people are in the wrong place, wrong room number. The JC volunteers sort through all that first, so we are able to spend time with the right*

people.” The existence of the ILJC program has also allowed the self-help centers to provide the additional service of escorting people to other offices to file their documents. One legal aid attorney described the value of accompanying clients who need extra help: *“It’s very helpful to assist clients with language barriers or who have an intellectual barrier that may affect their understanding of the process. The JC program is really helpful in helping us assist a broader clientele.”*

Improved services in court-based clinics or workshops - In smaller courthouses, without permanent and dedicated legal self-help centers, legal aid organizations often come into the courthouse on specific days each week to provide clinics, workshops or mediation services. ILJC members refer litigants to these services and also assist legal aid staff in providing the services. *“Several legal aid organizations come to our courthouse. One is here every Friday and works in the law library alongside the JC volunteers.”* A law professor who created a mediation program that operates at three courthouses described how ILJC members greet people, check in new litigants, explain the steps in the process, and get them started with their paperwork. *“This allows our staff to work with returnees, advise them, and work on the more complex matters.”* She also described that at one of the courthouses, their mediation program is located next door to the court in the arbitration center. ILJC members located in the rotunda of the courthouse, guide them to our place next door efficiently. *“They used to have trouble finding our building, and would often show up late for appointments.”*

Impact on Court Users

The new and expanded services provided by ILJC members in Illinois courthouses and legal self-help centers, not only positively impacted the courts but also is perceived to result in positive outcomes for court users. These findings described below are similar in concept to those described above, but it is important to emphasize that the ILJC program benefits not only the courts and legal aid organizations, but also the court users, who are often the direct recipients of ILJC services. Again, these findings resulted from 24 interviews with court staff and legal service providers who work closely with ILJC members in the Illinois courts.

Getting information and questions answered quickly - Almost everyone interviewed mentioned how daunting and confusing it can be for self-represented litigants to navigate the court buildings and the court system. When people arrive at the courthouse they are usually under stress, and are unsure where to go and what to do. Traditionally, finding a person or place within the courthouse to even ask a question is a challenge. Due to the ILJC program, there are now more trained, friendly volunteers -- at visible locations, such as kiosks and information desks, and in other locations in the building such as self-help desks and law libraries --where court users can quickly ask a question, and get information and directions to help them begin to accomplish their tasks in the court. *“People are often confused when they come to our courthouse. It is so great to have people [ILJC members] who have familiarity with our facilities, can listen to people and look at their papers and give them directions.”*

Receiving substantive, practical assistance - Most people interviewed described the value to court users of receiving concrete, substantive assistance from ILJC members. This included assistance filling out legal forms, receiving explanations about their legal situations, language assistance, and being escorted to other offices in the courthouse. One court administrator described, *“The JC workers are extremely helpful to them. They have a positive demeanor and are well-trained and don’t ever overstep their boundaries as far as giving legal advice.”* Another described, *“It is a benefit to older people who get assistance from a nice, smart young person.”* An attorney described how navigating the court system and courthouse is a *“daunting challenge,”* and how it reassures him to know that people are getting the help they need.

Having a less stressful and intimidating court experience - The majority of court staff and legal aid staff interviewed mentioned positive emotional impacts of the ILJC services on *pro se* litigants. As described above, ILJC members often exhibit friendly and caring behaviors, listen to people’s situation and provide helpful information. One court administrator described how having the ILJC members providing service throughout the courthouse helped people *“feel better and less apprehensive about their interaction with the court system.”* Another mentioned that he repeatedly saw that people exhibited *“decreased visible anxiety”* after interacting with the ILJC members. Other court administrator interviewed shed light on how ILJC members helped decrease the anxiety of people completing legal forms or going before a judge. *“People are frightened and unhappy being*

here, so it's good to have someone talk to them, explain process before they go into court." Another described: "Many people are coming in nervous or upset, so this is an important service to have a nice positive reassuring presence. JC volunteers help people fill out orders of protection or foreclosure mediation paperwork. These are emotional issues, and people are often very upset, so helping them in this time of need is very valuable."

Suggestions for Enhancing the Illinois JusticeCorps Program

All 24 individuals interviewed were asked to describe their ideas for program improvements, as well as their advice to other courts that might be starting a new ILJC program. Their responses fell into the following categories.

Continue the ILJC program.

When asked about suggestions for ILJC program improvements, many of those interviewed quickly expressed concern that the JC program might run out of funding and not continue, and that their courthouse would suffer from the loss of these services. One court administrator described how she gets very worried at the beginning of each new fiscal year, about whether they will have funding to continue. "We are very happy with the program, and with the JC volunteers who work in our court, and want the program to continue in the future." A judge replied: "The program is a great benefit to our court. We would like it to expand and continue." Several people mentioned wanting to help advocate for sustained ILJC program funding, with one suggesting a group effort toward developing state legislation to expand the program, and another stating: "I have heard there is concern about funding going forward. It would be good to have some more information, including whether we can help in any way."

Attend to the training needs of ILJC members.

When asked about suggestions for program improvements or recommendations to other courts starting an ILJC program, many of those interviewed referred to the ongoing need for training and re-training, as new members begin each year. People gave multiple suggestions regarding training of ILJC members, such as having hands-on training on court forms, and having judges prepare presentations about family law court procedures. Another suggested to, "Train all JC volunteers in the culture and the terminology and the life of the court. We have our volunteers go into the courtrooms at the beginning to make sure they're familiar with what happens in the courtrooms and during the hearings." Another person emphasized the need for training ILJC members about outside agencies that interact with the court. "Do a tour for JC students of other agencies located nearby. This helps them understand the entities that are related to the court and that they refer people to."

Make sure ILJC services are visible within the courthouse

Several people interviewed mentioned the importance of making sure the ILJC members and their services are highly visible within the courthouse. One described how ILJC members were recently used to survey court visitors, and to do this they temporarily moved their kiosk to the lobby area in front of the elevators. "This was really good. But then when the surveys were over, they moved back downstairs. It would be good to extend the presence onto other floors of the courthouse, so people know they are here." Similarly, an administrator in a smaller courthouse mentioned: "It is good that the JC members are not tucked away in the basement where their office is. They have a central location and are extremely helpful." Another person suggested "more directional signs to the JC members at locations where people can get help," and more clear branding of the program. "There should be JusticeCorps signs and labels on the podium, so people know who they are."

Give the ILJC program private workspace within the courthouse

While it is important for ILJC services to be located in highly visible areas in the courthouse, several people also mentioned that it is also important for members to have at least a small private workspace. "Create a space for the JC students to store their belongings, and a place to work, and train each other. At our court, they only have an open area, which is not ideal." Similarly, another administrator described: "When the JC program first started they were located in our law library, and didn't have a home, and were just flailing in the wind. They didn't have any space to talk among themselves, or decompress, or store their belongings." A judge echoed the sentiment of providing adequate workspace for the program. "They need a place to call home, and the services they

provide are well worth it. If you're willing to give them space this means you're buying in to the program and helping build good will and appreciation."

Expand the type of services that ILJC members provide

Several people interviewed described how they would like to expand the work of ILJC members to additional tasks and into additional offices in their courthouse. One administrator described how their court was starting to use the ILJC program to escort people through all the steps in the court process, and another mentioned beginning to use ILJC members to assist in scheduling management. Another court administrator described how they intended to expand beyond their original idea of using ILJC members to escort people to more of a hands-on approach of helping with forms. Similarly, another person explained how, *"Any division that is form-heavy would benefit from JC."* Several mentioned wanting to involve ILJC members in assisting people seeking orders of protection. A judge in the family division said that they could also use ILJC involvement with domestic violence orders. *"This is an area where we are really struggling, so we could use more people. Having this additional help from JC volunteers would facilitate further access to justice, fair treatment, and good customer service."* Finally, one person interviewed said he didn't have any specific suggestions for program improvement, but then continued: *"But I'm just wondering if they can get involved in more things beyond assisting pro se litigants. I'm just wondering if there are other areas of the courts where they can bring their youth and energy and help people using the courts."*

Give ILJC members responsibility and treat them as an important part of the team

When asked for suggestions for courts starting a new JC program, several people mentioned that it was important to take steps to make ILJC members feel welcome and like they are an important part of the team. It was suggested that in order to accomplish this, ILJC members should have specific yet varied tasks, be kept busy and be given real responsibility. *"Treat JC volunteers like staff. This will help them fit in right away."*

Promote the ILJC program.

When asked about suggestions for program improvements, several people mentioned that it was important to increase program branding through more signs and logos, and also to raise awareness of the program among the legal community and the general community. One judge described that the statewide ILJC program should educate and advocate among judges and law school professors the idea that participating in ILJC is a prestigious credential. *"I have learned from the deans of a wide variety of law schools in Illinois what their impressions are of the program. When they see AmeriCorps or JusticeCorps on someone's law school application, they know that it means a commitment to public service. We should make efforts for JC to become even more recognized and high profile."* Another judge advocated for increasing the profile of the program among the community, *"This program is a great community-oriented approach to help people get access to justice. So, it is important that the court lets the community know this program exists. Promote it, do outreach, so the community knows that there is a place within the courthouse where they can go to get help."*

Educate court staff and judges about the ILJC program.

Many people mentioned the importance of educating and orienting current court staff about the ILJC program. *"Introduce the JC volunteers to all court staff – administrators, children's waiting area staff, circuit clerk's office. Make sure they meet all the judges."* One person emphasized the importance of communicating to all judges and court staff before the program begins, about the program and its benefits. Another suggested to be sure everyone in the clerk's office knows the ILJC members and their role: *"Make sure the record-keeping arm of the court knows who the JC volunteers are, so they can refer people to them. We don't want clients ping ponged back and forth, we want them to know what JC volunteers can and cannot do."* As with training, there is a need to repeat orientation activities every year, since new people join the court staff. *"Make sure every year all the JC volunteers are introduced to the judges and key staff in the court. Have a welcome reception, or a thank-you reception at the end."* When asked for any advice about starting a new ILJC program, several people mentioned carefully building relationships. *"A lot of relationship building is necessary, interacting with all the staff, judges' secretaries, and security, and answering their questions."* Others described how court offices may not initially like the idea of the ILJC program and may need time to warm up to the idea. One described how initially several of their court staff were worried that too many *pro se* litigants would be directed to their office, but that the program ended up lessening their workload and they ended up liking it.

Learn from other courthouses and mirror their successful ILJC programs

Several people interviewed recommended that courts share information and learn from other ILJC programs and “don’t reinvent the wheel.” One court administrator described, “We are still in the process of making improvements. We are trying to get an information desk set up in the lobby, so the JC volunteers can be stationed there and direct individuals to various offices. We are not as big as the Daley Center, but want to mirror that aspect. We also want to give them a sign identifying who they are.”

Encourage other courthouses to start an ILJC program.

When asked for advice to other courts about starting a new ILJC program, the most common type of advice was along these lines: “They should all do it. Some courts don’t take advantage of it. Get them in the courthouse and use them.” Court administrators and judges encouraged other courts to embrace the program. “It has worked wonderfully here. We have six counties in our circuit, and for some reason some of the counties did not want to have any JC volunteers at all. My advice is to give JC volunteers responsibility and really embrace them. Several people acknowledged that new courts could be initially wary of the program as something additional to manage. One administrator stated, “They are very independent, they manage themselves.” A judge mentioned, “A lot of chief judges have their hands full with management problems. From my experience, I have had no troubles at all as far as managing the JC program, which has been a pleasant surprise.” A court administrator suggested new courts should go in with an open mind, and be able to make adjustments and improvements as they go along. Another judge described how the Illinois Supreme Court recently released new guidelines for everyone in the courts who interacts with *pro se* litigants. He described how the courts were really happy to get these new clear guidelines, and that the ruling helped support the idea behind the ILJC program. “It came out of the need for access to justice. I am very pleased that we have them [the new guidelines], and we encourage every circuit to not be afraid of putting JC volunteers in the courthouse.”

Expand the ILJC program to include more courthouses and more ILJC members.

Almost everyone interviewed expressed the desire for the ILJC program to grow. Several people interviewed spoke of their current plans to expand the program at their court, either by increasing the number of ILJC members or by having the current ILJC members work additional days per week or work full-time during the summer. “The only thing wrong with the program is that it’s not twice as large. They are really meeting a need, but it is a huge need to fill.” Other people interviewed echoed similar sentiments, with one stating their court only had two ILJC members and that they would like more, and another asking: “Can we expand, can we implement it elsewhere? We are a five-county circuit, and four of them are very understaffed, and we wish we could provide some assistance there but don’t have any resources.” A judge interviewed also described the need for additional ILJC services in the rural parts of the state: “I believe there is great need for these type of services in the non-urban parts of Illinois. Unlike California, Illinois has 50% living in one gigantic city, and then hundreds of miles of farms. The challenge is how to bring these services to these folks. We need to expand the program, and help it expand through greater use of technology. JC could just as easily be skyping into those courthouses. I think this can be done and is essential.”