



**JUDICIAL COUNCIL
OF CALIFORNIA**

455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA
94102-3688
Tel. 415-865-4200
Fax 415-865-4205
www.courts.ca.gov

FACT SHEET

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Programs for Self-Represented Litigants

California's courts are seeing an ever-increasing number of litigants who go to court without legal counsel, largely because they cannot afford representation. Self-represented litigants typically are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms, as well as with their rights and obligations, which leaves them disadvantaged in court and may require the courts to expend significant resources. Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in law, and economic changes are forcing a higher number of self-represented litigants to request more services. Accordingly, the Judicial Council has made access to the courts for self-represented litigants one of its top priorities. It has adopted a Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants and charged its Advisory Committee on Providing Access and Fairness with on-going implementation of the plan. The council is directly involved with the following programs and services.

Self-Help Centers

California Rules of Court, rule 10.960, provides that attorney-supervised, court-based self-help centers are a core function of the California courts. Self-help centers are located in or near the courthouse and are staffed by attorneys and other qualified personnel under their direction to provide information and education to self-represented litigants about the justice process and to work with the court to provide effective management of cases involving self-represented litigants. In response to rule 10.960, guidelines for the operation of court self-help centers were adopted. The guidelines address topics including attorney and other staff qualifications, scope of services, ethics, language access, and efficiency of operation.

Funding is provided to every trial court to support self-help services throughout the state. These programs, in collaboration with the family law facilitators, now serve over 1.2 million people annually.

Family Law Facilitators

Many self-help centers are combined with the family law facilitator programs in their courts. Family Code section 10002 established an office of the family law facilitator in each of the 58 counties. The Judicial Council administers the program, providing funds to these court-based offices, which are staffed by licensed attorneys. These facilitators, working for the superior court, guide litigants through procedures related to child support, maintenance of health insurance, and spousal support. They assist with cases where the local child support agency is providing services for establishment of parentage and child support and the modification and enforcement of child support. Family law facilitators can help parties with forms, court procedures, and support calculations, and they provide workshops and referrals to community agencies that assist parents and families.

Equal Access Fund

Each year, 10 percent of the state Equal Access Fund is allocated for Partnership Grants for joint projects of courts and legal services programs to provide legal assistance in civil matters to self-represented litigants. The Judicial Council works with the State Bar of California's Legal Services Trust Fund Commission to distribute Partnership Grant funds through a competitive process. Consideration is given to projects that serve a diverse range of geographic areas, substantive issues, and client constituencies. Currently, over 35 Partnership Grant projects are funded in more than 15 counties throughout the state.

Family Law Information Centers

Family Law Information Centers can be found at the Superior Courts of Fresno, Los Angeles, and Sutter Counties. These centers are supervised by attorneys and assist low-income self-represented litigants with forms, information, and resources concerning divorce, separation, parentage, child and spousal support, property division, and custody and visitation. Staff at the centers work closely with the family law facilitators in these three counties to coordinate services.

Model Self-Help Centers

Four model self-help centers—Spanish-speaking, multilingual, technology, urban collaboration, and regional coordination—were created to pilot new methods of providing services. The funding for the fifth model is used to support technology projects at numerous courts to improve self-help services and accessibility to the public. The insights gained from the pilot projects have been used in the development of the guidelines for self-help centers, and the materials developed by the programs have been made available and serve as models for replication.

JusticeCorps

The [JusticeCorps](#) program began in 2004 and continues as an innovative partnership of the Judicial Council, AmeriCorps, several California Superior Courts, various University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) and private campuses, and community-based legal aid services providers. It is supported by federal funding that is administered by [California Volunteers](#) and sponsored by [AmeriCorps](#), a federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering.

JusticeCorps supplements the work at California's self-help centers with the services it provides and helps thousands of people annually gain a greater understanding of their cases and assist them in navigating the legal system. Using the [AmeriCorps](#) national service model, JusticeCorps trains undergraduate students and recent college graduates to provide one-on-one assistance (not legal advice) to self-represented litigants at the self-help centers at the Superior Courts of Los Angeles and San Diego County. The Bay Area collaborative, led by the Superior Court of Alameda County, places JusticeCorps members at San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara Superior Court's self-help centers.

Online Forms and Document Assembly Programs

California has standardized statewide forms for nearly all matters involving self-represented litigants. All Judicial Council forms can be completed online and saved as PDFs. Staff to the Judicial Council have developed document assembly programs that ask litigants questions and fill in the appropriate forms with their answers.

Thus, many litigants are able to complete the forms necessary for a divorce, small claims action, civil restraining orders, guardianship, conservatorship, name change, unlawful detainer, and other similar actions in the privacy of their home, in a library, or in a domestic violence shelter or community agency. The forms can then be filed with the court.

Website

The Judicial Council provides a comprehensive Self-Help Guide (SHG) for self-represented litigants and for others wishing to become better informed about the law and court procedures. The website is designed to help its users navigate the court system and acquire realistic expectations about the legal system. Over 4 million visitors use the SHG each year at selfhelp.courts.ca.gov.

The SHG provides over 4,000 pages of content, including step-by-step instructions, wayfinding functionality, and general information presented in a rigorously vetted layout, optimized for usability. The site has content on most civil issues, with particular emphasis on the most trafficked issues, divorce and small claims. Instructional guides are provided for forms that litigants must file in court. These forms can be filled out online at no cost and printed and filed with the court.

Additionally, a majority of the site has been translated into Spanish, with plans to include translations for other languages, including Arabic; Chinese, Simplified; Filipino; Korean; Persian, Farsi; Punjabi; Russian; and Vietnamese.

Links to a wide variety of resources—including legal aid agencies, self-help centers, and community resources such as domestic violence programs—are accessible on the SHG. The Judicial Council also maintains a website entitled *Families Change*, www.familieschange.ca.gov, which provides extensive information for children, teens, and parents in an interactive and age-appropriate manner on family law issues.

An online parenting education class is included on the site and provides three hours of free online video-based classes to help parents help their children during divorce or separation. There is also a class on *Finances after Separation* to help explain child and spousal support and division of property issues.

Videos

The Judicial Council offers many videos to explain basic legal issues and court processes. These videos are now included on the updated Self-Help Guide website and can also be found on the California Courts YouTube website. These videos include topics on small claims, landlord/tenant, juvenile dependency, juvenile delinquency, civil harassment, and alternative dispute resolution. The videos are available in English and Spanish.

Resource Sharing

To assist the courts and legal services agencies in providing the most effective assistance possible, the Judicial Council has developed a website that shares resources—including sample instructional materials, translations, program designs, and best practices—among programs. This Equal Access web page, which is available at www.courts.ca.gov/programs-equalaccess.htm, allows regular updating and sharing of helpful information.

The Judicial Council also offers an annual conference on self-help and family law in conjunction with the Legal Aid Association of California. This conference includes substantive information and updates, as well as new program designs and best practices. These live trainings—combined with webinars, active listserves, and links to free-online training—help the courts to provide high-quality legal assistance in their self-help centers.

The Council also offers a Self - Help Center support tool, SHMOODLE! SHMOODLE stands for Self-Help Moodle, which is the name of the new digitalized central training repository for self-help centers. This site is intended for self-help staff to access resources such as online trainings, books, bench guides and toolkits.

The SHMOODLE site contains training and resources on: legal topics; self-help center operations; understanding the courts, the legislature and legal research; understanding budgets and financial issues; and it features a section that will be regularly populated with upcoming training events. The SHMOODLE [site](#) is only accessible via authorized account set up.

Education and Training

Enabling court staff to effectively assist self-represented litigants is a key part of the Judicial Council's mission to make the courts more accessible.

- The Judicial Council has sponsored numerous conferences on self-represented litigants to allow court staff, judges, and community providers to learn about emerging legal topics and trends, developments in technology to assist self-help programs and participants, ethical considerations, and customer service strategies to name a few.
- The Judicial Council staff hosts a weekly webinar to provide training and promote discussion on topics important to supporting successful self-help center work.
- The Judicial Council staff sponsors additional efforts to promote education and training through sharing materials and ideas developed by county court-based self-help center staff with self-help center staff statewide.
- The Judicial Council's Center for Judiciary Education and Research holds many classes and seminars addressing issues that concern self-represented litigants, including satellite broadcast sessions for court clerks on the difference between legal information and legal advice and for presiding judges and court executive officers on ways courts can best handle cases with self-represented litigants.
- The Judicial Council, with the support of the State Justice Institute, published *Handling Cases Involving Self-Represented Litigants: A Benchguide for Judicial Officers*, which provides information to judges on ethics, courtroom and case management, communication skills, evidence, and other key topics. The State Justice Institute awarded the Judicial Council the Howell Heflin Award in 2008 for the guide as the grant project with the greatest potential to significantly improve the administration of justice in state courts nationwide. The benchguide has now been adapted for national use.

National Self-Represented Litigation Network

California is a founding member of the National Self-Represented Litigation Network. The network has developed self-evaluation tools for courts and self-help

centers to assess how effectively they are meeting the needs of self-represented litigants, research on communication between judicial officers and self-represented litigants, and best practices in self-help centers. By exchanging information and working together with programs throughout the country, courts are able to use scarce resources to identify the most effective ways for the courts to serve those persons who do not have the resources to hire attorneys.