JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA

455 Golden Gate Avenue • San Francisco, California 94102-3688

www.courts.ca.gov

REPORT TO THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL

Item No.: 21-003
For business meeting on January 22, 2021

Title
Report to the Legislature: Impact of Self-Help Center Expansion in California Courts

Submitted by
Charlene Depner, Director
Bonnie Rose Hough, Managing Attorney
Center for Families, Children & the Courts

Agenda Item Type
Information Only

Date of Report
January 4, 2021

Contact
Don Will, 415-865-7557
don.will@jud.ca.gov

Executive Summary

The Budget Act of 2018 (Stats. 2018, ch. 29) provided $19.1 million per year in additional funding for self-help centers for a three-year period. It required that the Judicial Council prepare a cost-benefit report assessing the costs and benefits of each method by which self-help services are provided and how cost-effectiveness may vary across issue areas. It further required an assessment of the impacts of self-help services on trial court operations. The attached report is submitted in response to that statutory requirement.

Previous Council Action

On September 21, 2018, the Judicial Council adopted allocations for self-help funding to trial courts for 2019–2020 through 2021. It maintained the current self-help allocation baseline of $34,000 per court to be revisited in 2021, after this report to the Legislature.[1]

Analysis/Rationale

The Budget Act of 2018 included an additional $19.1 million for self-help centers. This augmentation increased total program funding from $11.2 million—which had been allocated since 2007—to $30.3 million annually. Augmentation of California's court-based self-help

[1] Judicial Council of Cal., *Trial Court Budget: Self-Help Funding, Allocation Methodology for 2019–20 and Ongoing* (Aug. 29, 2018).

center budgets by the Legislature and the Governor allowed for a significant expansion in services, including the range of legal issues addressed and the availability and types of services provided.

The Budget Act of 2018 also mandated that the Judicial Council conduct a cost-benefit analysis of self-help services and submit a report to the Legislature on its findings by November 30, 2020. The statute provided that the "analysis shall assess the costs and benefits of each method by which self-help services are provided and how cost-effectiveness may vary across issue areas. Costs and benefits shall also include the impacts of self-help services on trial court operations."[2] The attached report is the fulfillment of that requirement.

Key Findings

Self-Help Expansion: Fiscal Years 2018–19 to 2020–21

Court-based self-help centers reflect the judicial branch's commitment to equal access to the courts for all of California's almost 40 million residents. The $19.1 million augmentation increased the existing funding for self-help centers from $11.2 million annually to $30.3 million. The augmentation was used to serve the public by increasing both attorney and nonattorney staff, better serving persons of limited English proficiency by increasing bilingual staff, opening new self-help centers and increasing hours of service in other centers, and expanding services case types including landlord-tenant, consumer debt, and guardianship cases.

The full amount was allocated to all courts using the same population-based formula that was used in previous years. In fiscal year 2018–19, 80 percent of the $30.3 million allocation was spent on attorney and nonattorney staff, with 20 percent spent on nonpersonnel costs to expand self-help center services. By fiscal year 2019–20, 95 percent of the allocation was spent on personnel to provide direct services to self-represented litigants.

During fiscal years 2018–19 and 2019–20, self-help centers approximately doubled attorney and nonattorney professional staff, going from 156 to 336 full-time equivalent staff. Forty-six percent of the new staff members are bilingual.

Courts added 14 self-help center locations in the same time period. California now has 135 court-based self-help center locations. Ten courts also reconfigured space to accommodate increased numbers of self-represented litigants.

Many centers upgraded their technology infrastructure—a decision that enabled them to continue providing services remotely when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the ability for members of the public to visit a court in-person.

Twenty-two courts increased hours of operation, adding an average 13 hours per week. Courts reported that these additional hours allowed them to provide services in more case types, add

[2] Stats. 2018, ch. 29, item 0250-101-0932, provision 17.

remote services such as videoconferencing, and schedule appointments for more complex services, such as settlement assistance.

Services to Persons with Limited English Proficiency

- 18 courts added or expanded Spanish-language services;
- 8 courts added or expanded other language services;
- 32 courts hired bilingual staff;
- 3 courts began using videoconferencing to access live translation services remotely; and
- 7 percent of extended self-help services were provided in a language other than English.

Increasing Capacity in Eviction and Consumer Debt Cases

Courts used expansion funding to significantly increase the capacity of their self-help centers to assist with eviction cases and consumer debt matters.

Innovative Services: Meeting the Demand

Expansion funding allowed self-help centers to deploy innovative service methods developed in a variety of pilot programs developed by other Judicial Council programs, and scale them out so more courts incorporated them into their self-help center portfolio of services. Courts adopted or expanded on a range of more efficient service delivery models, including:

- ***Workshops.*** With increased funding, 32 courts added workshops to efficiently serve many more self-represented litigants.
- ***Document assembly.*** Forty-one court-based self-help centers now offer document assembly programs, which provide a simple question-and-answer interface to help self-represented litigants produce accurate, complex court forms for case filings.
- ***Videoconferencing workshops conducted at one court to multiple courts in real time.*** While many smaller courts offer few or no workshops on their own, through the SHARP Tech Connect program 22 small courts have joined together with videoconferencing technology to allow courts to offer their live online workshop to litigants in other court locations.
- ***Providing a portfolio of services that is responsive to community needs.*** Courts offered a mix of service models, including brief information sessions, extended one-on-one services, help with settlement, workshops, clinics, and technology-based delivery to most effectively address the broadest needs of the greatest number of community members.
- ***Meeting the COVID-19 crisis.*** Courts rapidly expanded their remote services to address the pandemic and are now integrating remote services as a basic service rather than a crisis response.
- ***Continuing to scale up and scale out efficient approaches.*** Training and support from the Judicial Council helped courts adopt innovative and efficient approaches to services. The

Court Innovations Grant Program, initiatives of the Commission on the Future of California's Courts, and the Judicial Council's work to regularly convene self-help centers to educate and disseminate innovations and efficiencies all support the courts as they adopt new approaches to meet the needs of the public.

Looking Forward

Expansion funding has provided more self-help services to the people of California. Continuing the expansion funding will allow the judicial branch to sustain these increased services and, through the integration of new approaches and technologies, better serve even more of California's self-represented litigants.

Based upon customer feedback, even at the current expansion level of funding, the public expresses a need for additional staffing (especially bilingual staff), extended hours, and shorter wait times for appointments and services.

The pandemic has shown us the need to have a variety of vehicles for delivering self-help services, both in-person and remote. Self-help services had base infrastructure in place resulting from the judicial branch's strategic planning for technology and were able to quickly begin providing remote services, but remote technology and practice is not fully integrated into the service. Remote services must become a basic service rather than a temporary way to address a crisis, and investment in those services will provide more access and prepare us to handle future crises with less disruption whether they are due to natural disasters, pandemic, or other unexpected events.

Pilots that are proving successful will need funding to scale up to include more functionality and scale out so that more courts can offer those services. Online digital services are proving to be especially cost-effective and helpful to self-represented litigants.

Emerging technologies and approaches need to be continually pursued so that we can adopt new ways to provide information, instruction, and simpler court processes. Investment in data collection and analytics will help us (1) pinpoint areas where self-represented litigants need the most assistance, (2) create new services, (3) improve existing services and processes, and (4) identify where in the judicial process we can improve and streamline to reduce costs for the court and the court visitor.

Fiscal and Operational Impacts

Judicial Council staff will continue to provide technical support to courts to help them in continuing to provide a high level of service in light of the social distancing protocols in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information from the report will be considered as part of the process of making any recommendations regarding future funding.

Attachments and Links

1. Attachment A: *Impact of Self-Help Center Expansion in California Courts*

Impact of Self-Help Center Expansion in California Courts

REPORT TO THE CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE

January 2021

JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA
OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMS DIVISION
CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN & THE COURTS

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Executive Summary

The Budget Act of 2018 included an additional $19.1 million for court-based self-help centers. This augmentation increased total program funding from $11.2 million—which had been appropriated since 2007—to $30.3 million annually. The Budget Act also mandated that the Judicial Council conduct and submit to the Legislature a cost-benefit analysis of court-based self-help services.[1] The statute provided that the "analysis shall assess the costs and benefits of each method by which self-help services are provided and how cost-effectiveness may vary across issue areas. Costs and benefits shall also include the impacts of self-help services on trial court operations."[2] The Legislative Analyst's Office, in *The 2020–21 Budget: Criminal Justice Proposals,* also commented that "[t]his analysis will determine which methods of delivering services (such as one-on-one services or workshops) are most cost-effective and in what case types."[3]

This report fulfills that requirement. It describes the impact of the additional funding as well as the efficiencies and innovations in service delivery developed through other judicial branch initiatives. When these service delivery models are paired with the self-help funding expansion, the program has shown it can meet the needs of the public with services that are easier for the public to access, more in-depth, and address more of the legal areas that self-represented litigants face.

Self-Help Expansion: Fiscal Years 2018–19 to 2020–21

Every court in California has a self-help center dedicated to assisting people who are not represented by lawyers to navigate the court system. Each center "must include an attorney and other qualified staff who provide information and education to self-represented litigants about the justice process, and work within the court to provide for the effective management of cases involving self-represented litigants. The information and education provided by court self-help centers must be neutral and unbiased, and services must be available to all sides of a case."[4] The self-help center attorneys and other staff do not provide legal counsel, support court operations or act as research attorneys for judicial officers. They are focused on providing legal information and education to the public. The state annual budget appropriation of $30.3 million funds the operations of court-based self-help centers and is restricted to that use.

Court-based self-help centers reflect the judicial branch's commitment to equal access to the courts for all of California's almost 40 million residents. The $19.1 million augmentation

[1] This report was delayed by a final data analysis review and verification process and was submitted on January 8, 2020.

[2] Stats. 2018, ch. 29, item 0250-101-0932, provision 17.

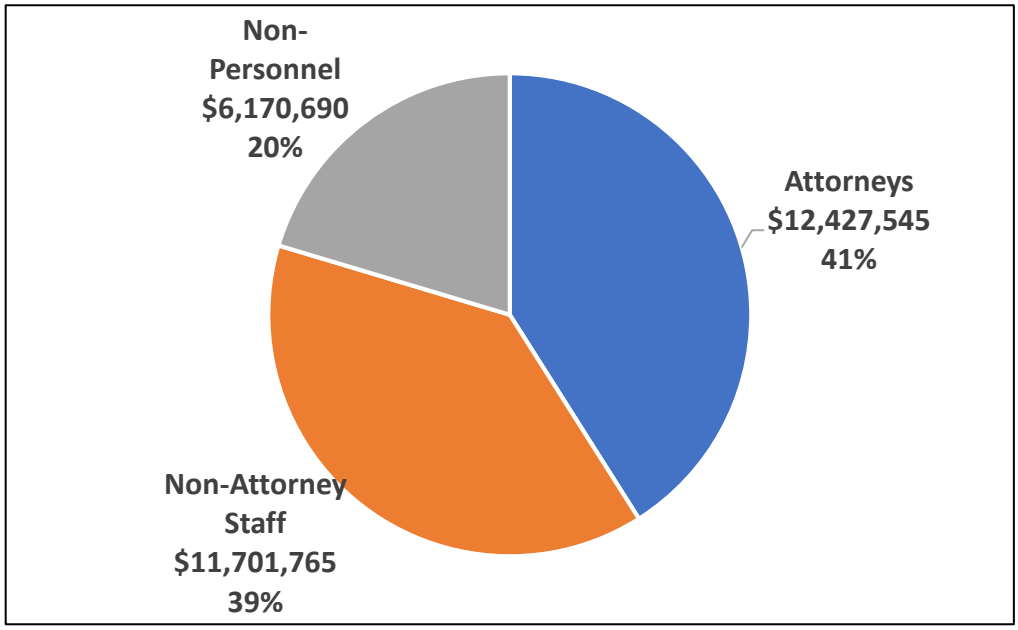
[3] Legislative Analyst's Office, *The 2020–21 Budget: Criminal Justice Proposals*, *https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4164?utm_source=laowww&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=4164#Judicial_Branch*.

[4] Cal. Rules of Court, rule 10.960.

increased the existing funding for self-help centers from $11.2 million annually to $30.3 million. The augmentation was used to serve the public by increasing both attorney and non-attorney staff, better serving persons of limited English proficiency by increasing bilingual staff, opening new self-help centers and increasing hours of service in other centers, and expanding services in case types including landlord-tenant, consumer debt, and guardianship.

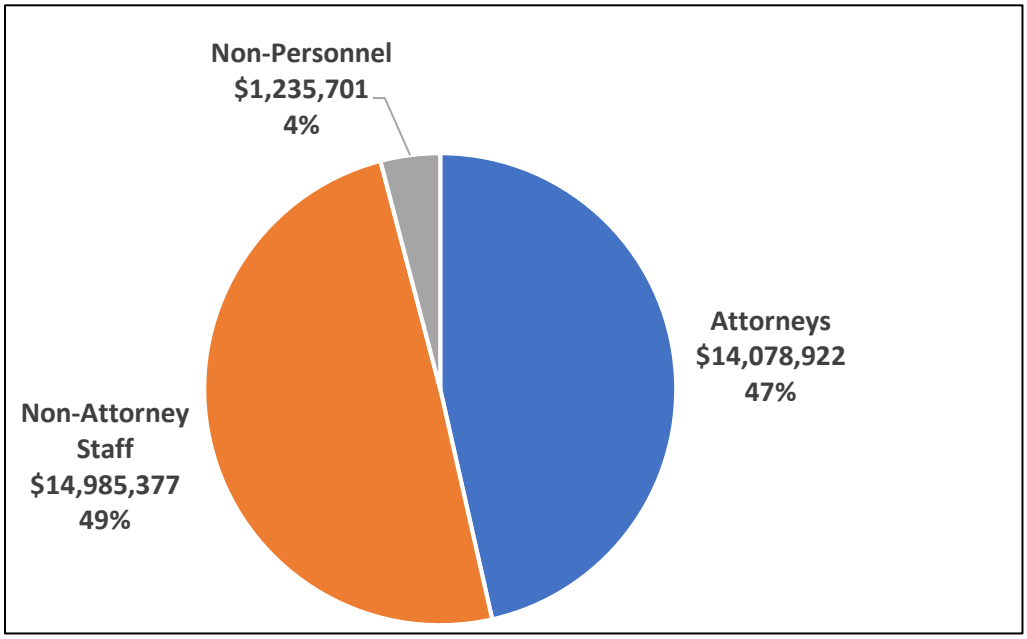
The full amount was allocated to all courts using the same population-based formula that was used in previous years. In fiscal year 2018–19, 80 percent of the $30.3 million funding was spent on attorney and non-attorney staff, with 20 percent spent on non-personnel costs to expand self-help center services. By fiscal year 2019–20, 95 percent of the funding was spent on personnel to provide direct services to self-represented litigants.

Figure A. Self-Help Center Spending During First Year of Expansion—FY 2018–19



Source: Fiscal Year 2018–19 Self-Help Center Budgets.

Figure B. Self-Help Center Spending During Second Year of Expansion—FY 2019–20



Source: Fiscal Year 2019–20 Self-Help Center Budgets.

Members of the Public Served

Visitor Count

In calendar year 2019, the first full year of data collection on the expansion, self-help centers provided services to **1,011,315** in-person and remote visitors:

- 510,560 were provided in-depth self-help services that generally range from 30 to 60 minutes;
- 444,924 were provided brief services lasting 5 minutes or less;
- 55, 831 were provided workshops.

In 2020, after a steep decline in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, self-help centers rebounded, with a mix of remote and in-person services, to serve as many customers per month in August as they had before the crisis.

Service Expansion

The self-help centers recorded steady increases in numbers served between the period when all courts began reporting data and the last month before the pandemic. The monthly number of services provided to in-person and remote visitors increased from January 2019 to January 2020:

- In-depth services increased from 46,700 to 51,401, a 10 percent increase;
- Total monthly services including in-depth, brief, and workshops increased by 25 percent.

Comparing the data reported in calendar year 2019 to the data reported before the self-help center expansion in fiscal year 2017–18:

- One-on-one, in-depth services to visitors increased from 314,504 to 510,560 (up 62 percent).
- The number of persons served by workshops increased from 51,649 to 55,831 (up 8 percent).

Self-Help Center Capacity Expansion

During fiscal years 2018–19 and 2019–20, self-help centers approximately **doubled attorney and non-attorney professional staff**, going from 156 to 336 full-time equivalent staff. Forty-six percent of the new staff members are bilingual.

Courts added 14 self-help center locations in the same time period. California now has 135 court-based self-help center locations. Ten courts also reconfigured space to accommodate increased numbers of self-represented litigants.

Many centers upgraded their technology infrastructure—a decision that enabled them to continue providing services remotely when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the ability of members of the public to visit a court in person.

Twenty-two courts increased hours of operation, adding an *additional* 13 hours per week. Courts reported that these additional hours allowed them to provide services in more case types, add remote services such as videoconferencing, and to schedule appointments for more complex services, such as settlement assistance.

➢ *See Chapter 1, Major Accomplishments—Self-Help Centers and the Impact of New Funding.*

Services to Persons with Limited English Proficiency

- 18 courts added or expanded Spanish-language services;
- 8 courts added or expanded other language services;
- 32 courts hired bilingual staff;
- 3 courts began using videoconferencing to access live translation services remotely;
- 7 percent of extended self-help services were provided in a language other than English.

➢ *See Chapter 7, Serving Litigants with Limited English Proficiency.*

Increasing Capacity in Eviction and Consumer Debt Cases

Courts used expansion funding to significantly increase the capacity of their self-help centers to assist with eviction cases and consumer debt matters—issues that have only gained urgency since the COVID-19 pandemic.

➢ *See Chapter 6, Civil Expansion.*

The Challenge of Demand for Services

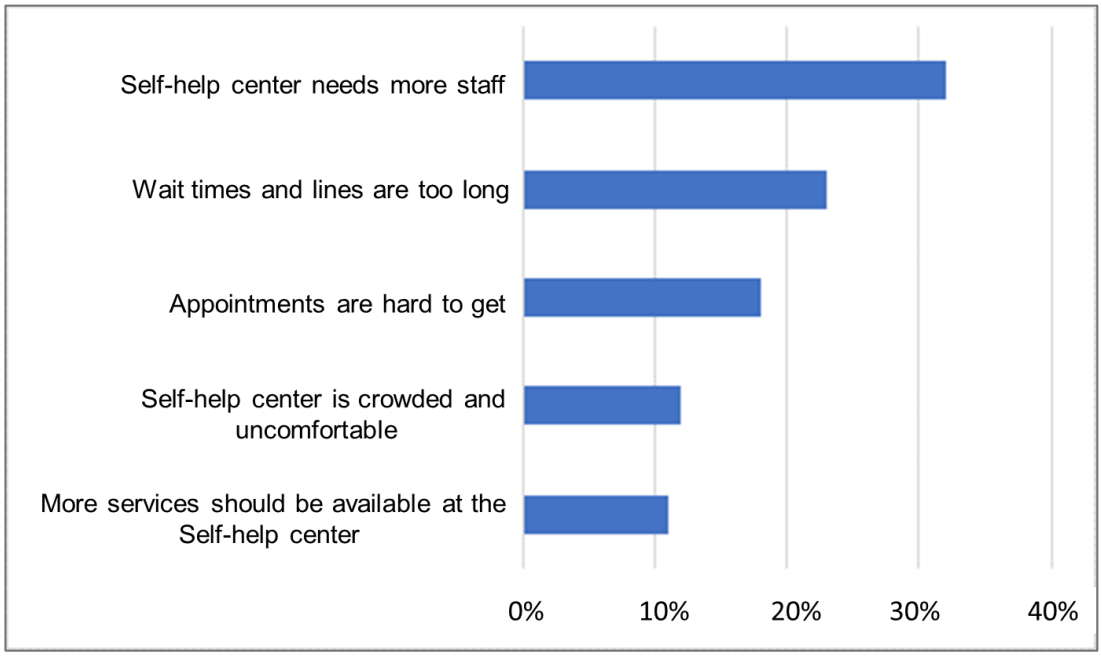
According to the Legal Services Corporation's 2017 justice gap report, even when experiencing legal problems that have a significant impact on them, most low-income Californians do not receive legal help. Only 27 percent of low-income Californians reported receiving some legal help.[5]

Legal services programs, a valuable resource for persons in severe poverty, cannot serve all low-income Californians. Most legal services use an income cap of 125 percent of the national rate of poverty to provide services. Attorneys, whether in legal services or private practice, are not available in many communities. While the number of residents per attorney is 175 in urban areas of California, in rural areas the number increases to 626 residents per attorney.[6]

[5] Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans* (2017), p. 48, www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-FullReport.pdf

[6] California Commission on Access to Justice, *California's Attorney Deserts: Access to Justice Implications of the Rural Lawyer Shortage* (July 2019), www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/Attorney-Desert-Policy-Brief.pdf.

Figure C. Self-Help Customer Satisfaction Survey Respondents Identified Need for Additional Capacity Expansion



Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, 2019. Analysis of open-ended responses, n = 1,001.

Self-represented litigants at the self-help centers note a need to expand capacity. During a customer satisfaction survey in October 2019 of 6,821 customers, respondents were asked to describe in what way services could be improved. Of the 1,001 customers who gave detailed suggestions for improvement, the overwhelming majority were related to capacity expansion (Figure C).

Innovative Services: Meeting the Demand

Expansion funding allowed self-help centers to deploy innovative service methods developed in a variety of pilot programs developed by other Judicial Council programs and to scale them out so more courts could incorporate them into their self-help center portfolio of services. Courts adopted or expanded on a range of more efficient service delivery models, including:

- ***Workshops.*** With increased funding, 32 courts added workshops to efficiently serve many more self-represented litigants. In 2019, more than 6 percent of in-person assistance was provided by workshops in family law, guardianship and conservatorship, small claims, probate, consumer debt, and clearing criminal records.

  ➢ *See Chapter 5, Workshops.*

- ***Document assembly.*** Forty-one court-based self-help centers now offer document assembly programs, which provide a simple question-and-answer interface to help self-represented litigants produce accurate, complex court forms for case filings. From fiscal year 2018–19 to 2019–20, the number of people using the programs increased from 157,251 to 206,845 (31 percent), while the number of form sets generated for self-represented litigants increased from 99,522 to 123,014 (24 percent).

  ➢ *See Chapter 9, Document Assembly.*

- ***Videoconferencing workshops conducted at one court that are available to multiple courts in real time.*** While many smaller courts offer few or no workshops on their own, through the SHARP Tech Connect program 22 small courts have joined together with videoconferencing technology to allow courts to offer their live online workshop to litigants in other court locations. They also are piloting online prerecorded workshops that the public can attend from home or work.

  ➢*See Chapter 8, Remote Services.*

- ***Providing a portfolio of services that is responsive to community needs.*** Courts offered a mix of service models, including brief information sessions, extended one-on-one services, help with settlement, workshops, clinics, and technology-based delivery to most effectively address the broadest needs of the greatest number of community members.

- ***Meeting the COVID-19 crisis.*** Courts rapidly expanded their remote services to address the pandemic and are now integrating remote services as a basic service rather than a crisis response.

- ***Continuing to scale up and scale out efficient approaches.*** Training and support from the Judicial Council helped courts adopt innovative and efficient approaches to services. The Court Innovations Grant Program, initiatives of the Commission on the Future of California's Courts, and the Judicial Council's work to regularly convene self-help centers to educate and disseminate innovations and efficiencies all support the courts as they adopt new approaches to meet the needs of the public.

Looking Forward

Expansion funding has provided more self-help services to the people of California. Continuing the expansion funding will allow the judicial branch to sustain these increased services and, through the integration of new approaches and technologies, better serve even more of California's self-represented litigants.

Based on customer feedback, even at the current expansion level of funding, the public expresses a need for additional staffing (especially bilingual staff), extended hours, and shorter wait times for appointments and for services.

The pandemic has shown the need for a variety of vehicles for delivering self-help services, both in-person and remote. Self-help services had base infrastructure in place resulting from the judicial branch's strategic planning for technology and were able to quickly begin providing

remote services, but remote technology and practice is not fully integrated into the services. Remote services must become a basic service rather than a temporary way to address a crisis. Investment in those services will provide more access and prepare us to handle future crises with less disruption, whether they are due to natural disasters, pandemic, or other unexpected events.

Pilots that are proving successful will need funding to scale up to include more functionality and scale out so that more courts can offer those services. Online digital services are proving to be especially cost-effective and helpful to self-represented litigants.

Emerging technologies and approaches need to be continually pursued so that courts can adopt new ways to provide information, instruction, and simpler court processes.

Investment in data collection and analytics will help pinpoint areas where self-represented litigants need the most assistance, create new services, improve existing services and processes, and identify where in the judicial process can be improved and streamlined to reduce costs for the court and the court visitor.

Conclusion

The $19.1 million augmentation of funding for court-based self-help centers supported both service expansion and innovation. Information technology made it possible to increase the number of litigants served, to reach underserved populations, and to offer a wider range of services. It created the opportunity to introduce innovations, aimed at more efficient and effective services. Technology innovations that supported remote services proved to also be helpful in sustaining service to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. With ongoing funding, the self-help centers will continue efforts to scale up efficiencies and scale out for broader availability.

CHAPTER 1: Major Accomplishments—Self-Help Services and Expanding Access to Justice

"Providing access to justice for self-represented litigants is a priority for California courts. The services provided by court self-help centers facilitate the timely and cost-effective processing of cases involving self-represented litigants and improve the delivery of justice to the public."
Rule 10.960 of the California Rules of Court

Every court in California has a self-help center dedicated to assisting people who are not represented by lawyers to navigate the court system. Each center "must include an attorney and other qualified staff who provide information and education to self-represented litigants about the justice process, and work within the court to provide for the effective management of cases involving self-represented litigants. The information and education provided by court self-help centers must be neutral and unbiased, and services must be available to all sides of a case."[7] Self-help center staff provide legal information but do not provide legal advice or representation. They work closely with court administration and the bench to identify ways to provide effective services to court users.

Initial Development of Court-Based Self-Help Centers in California

Self-help centers began by addressing the needs of people who could not afford attorneys in family law matters.[8] Family law matters, which are critical to the physical and financial health and security of children and vulnerable adults, have been filed increasingly by litigants who are not represented by attorneys.

Two California courts began pilot programs in the 1990s to assist self-represented litigants with family law cases and, based on their success, the family law facilitator program was created in 1997. This program pays for facilitators to guide litigants through their own court procedures related to child support.[9] This unique and successful program established guidelines for court-funded attorneys to provide services to both parties without establishing an attorney-client relationship. These guidelines have been crucial for the expansion of a court-based self-help program that provides extensive, practical legal information and assistance.[10] The facilitator program also demonstrated a need for a much broader range of family law assistance.[11]

---

[7] Cal. Rules of Court, rule 10.960.

[8] Judicial Council of Cal., *Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants* (2004), Appendix 2, California Courts' Programs for Self-Represented Litigants.

[9] Family Law Facilitator Act, Fam. Code, § 10000 et seq.

[10] F. L. Harrison, D. J. Chase, and L. T. Surh, "California's Family Law Facilitator Program: A New Paradigm for the Courts" (2000) 2 *Journal of the Center for Families, Children & the Courts* 61–98.

[11] Fam. Code, § 4055.

With legislative support and funding, the Judicial Council in 2003 piloted five new self-help services and evaluated their effectiveness.[12] Based on the outcomes of the pilot program, in 2007 the Judicial Council allocated $11.2 million for self-help services in every court. In 2008, standards of practice were published by the Judicial Council in the *Guidelines for the Operation of Self-Help Centers in California's Trial Courts* (reaffirmed in 2008).

Self-help services have since expanded into other areas of law as the numbers of people coming to court without attorneys continues to grow.[13] As the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) reports, "The idealized picture of an adversarial system in which both parties are represented by competent attorneys who can assert all legitimate claims and defenses is an illusion."[14] A 2013 NCSC survey shows self-represented litigants in over 76 percent of civil cases nationally.[15] California is no exception to this national trend. The good news, however, is that California is leading the nation in assisting these litigants.

Self-help centers are now a core part of California's legal system. Ten percent of the general public and 16 percent of low-income people surveyed by the State Bar of California reported that they had gone to a court self-help center to address their legal problems.[16]

Factors Driving the Need for Self-Help Center Growth

In its 2019 California Justice Gap Study, the State Bar of California found that 55 percent of Californians at all income levels experienced at least one civil legal problem in their household each year, yet nearly 70 percent of them received no legal assistance.[17] Given that families struggle with housing security, paying their bills, providing care for their elders and children, and increasing levels of domestic violence and elder abuse, and as the state experiences increased unemployment and depleted savings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an indispensable legal resource for many people who need assistance will be the court self-help center.

---

[12] Judicial Council of Cal., *Family Law Information Centers: An Evaluation of Three Pilot Programs* (Mar. 2003), www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/FLIC-full.pdf; Judicial Council of Cal., *Model Self-Help Pilot Program: A Report to the Legislature* (Mar. 2005) (see ch. 3, Equal Access Partnership Grants, Projects, Services and Evaluation), www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/Equal-Access-Fund-March-2005.pdf.

[13] Commission on the Future of California's Court System, *Report to the Chief Justice* (2017).

[14] National Center for State Courts, *The Landscape of Civil Litigation in State Courts* (2015) at p. iv, www.ncsc.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13376/civiljusticereport-2015.pdf.

[15] National Center for State Courts, *Call to Action: Achieving Civil Justice for All* (2016), pp. 4–5 (recommendations by the Civil Justice Improvements Committee to the Conference of Chief Justices, citing *The Landscape of Civil Litigation in State Courts*).

[16] State Bar of Cal., *The California Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Californians* (Nov. 2019) at p. 35, www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/California-Justice-Gap-Report.pdf.

[17] State Bar of Cal., "2019 California Justice Gap Study." For the most recent statistics, visit the study's web page at www.calbar.ca.gov/Access-to-Justice/Initiatives/California-Justice-Gap-Study.

Gap Between Eligibility for Legal Aid and Ability to Afford Representation

The need for self-help services arises in part due to the increasing gap between those who can afford attorney's fees (that averaged $323 per hour in California in 2019)[18] on one end of the spectrum and those eligible for legal aid services on the other.

> *"I couldn't have afforded a lawyer and I was unable to complete these forms on my own.*
>
> *I got free help of a lawyer in a time when I am short of money. Everything is clear and staff very helpful."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

In order to ensure that legal services funding is used for the people with the greatest financial need, most legal services use an income cap of 125 percent of the national rate of poverty to provide services.[19] By illustration, in 2019, a person earning more than $15,950 per year ($307 per week), was likely ineligible for legal aid services. Some programs, such as the Judicial Council's Sargent Shriver Civil Counsel program,[20] expanded income eligibility to 200 percent of the poverty rate, which was equal to $25,520 per year ($491 per week).[21] And yet, there is still insufficient funding for legal aid services. Due to this severe lack of resources, the State Bar reports that even with strict income limitations, 41 percent of the 450,000 civil legal problems brought to legal aid agencies will not be served at all.[22]

And of course, with increasingly expensive overhead and insurance costs, attorneys in private practice must consider whether the prospective client will be able to pay for their work, a calculation that must be made in determining whether to take on a case. Ethical obligations often preclude lawyers from being released from their duty to represent a client just because the client can no longer afford to pay. Thus, the gap between those individuals who are eligible for legal aid because their income is well below the poverty rate and those who can afford an attorney at $323 or more per hour represents the hundreds of thousands of Californians who need access to justice, and whose best opportunity for receiving it is through the assistance of a court self-help center.

---

[18] Based on actual rates that lawyers charge in California, according to the Clio *2019 Legal Trends Report*, p. 53, www.clio.com/resources/legal-trends/2019-report/.

[19] Bus. & Prof. Code, § 6213(d); 42 U.S.C. § 2996g(e); Cal. Rules of Court, rule 1611.3(c).

[20] Gov. Code, § 68651(b)(1).

[21] Income Level for Individuals Available for Assistance (Legal Services Corporation 2020 Income Guidelines), 45 C.F.R. part 1611, www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&n=45y4.1.3.11.12&r=PART&ty=HTML#ap45.5.1611_19.a.

[22] *The California Justice Gap, supra* note 15, at p. 16.

Complex Law and Procedural Steps

Increased need also arises due to the complexity of the law and procedures that are designed to ensure due process. For example, people who want to divorce must get a judgment from the court. Even in an uncontested divorce case, where the parties may never have to appear in court before a judge, they still must provide extensive information to each other and the court to avoid unfair results.

What did you like most about the services you received?

"The relief that someone is able to help you step by step through the process as it is such an overwhelming one to go through."

"How they helped me organize all my paperwork and gave me the correct forms to fill out."

"Peace of mind that I have done the forms correctly."

–Customer Satisfaction Survey

Both spouses individually must prepare forms listing what they believe the family assets are, including the estimated values of those assets. They must list all of the family debts, and identify what they believe is community, separate, or quasi-community property.[23] Parties must also list all of their sources of income and all of their expenses.[24] If they are seeking child support, they must use a computer program that calculates, based on income, the impact of taxes, and a determination of time share, to figure out what the child support payment will be.[25] If they wish to receive or object to paying spousal support, they must provide the court with information about 16 factors including "the immediate and specific tax consequences to each party."[26] All of this requires a series of forms that must be filed and served on the other spouse, and then next-step processes differ depending on the responses from the spouse.[27] These tasks are complicated and time-consuming. All require at least a basic level of legal comprehension. These tasks are often undertaken during the height of the emotional and financial stress of the dissolution of a relationship. And all of these challenges are made more difficult if the divorce is contested. Self-help center staff help parties manage this cumbersome and, in some cases, frightening and intimidating system.

The law poses similar challenges in other case types where people often need court orders, including requests for domestic violence restraining orders, probate guardianship and conservatorship petitions, civil harassment restraining orders, elder abuse claims, and in many other cases that are critical to people's lives.

---

[23] Fam. Code, § 2104(c).

[24] Fam. Code, § 2014(e).

[25] *In re Marriage of Carter* (1994) 26 Cal.App.4th 1024.

[26] Fam. Code, § 4320.2

[27] See *Legal Steps for a Divorce or Legal Separation* (Judicial Council form FL-107-INFO), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/fl107info.pdf.

While significant efforts have been made to simplify the forms and processes litigants must use,[28] legal procedures remain challenging. Without assistance from a self-help center, people generally have difficulty completing the forms needed and following the processes required.

Additional Challenges for People Facing Eviction and Consumer Debt Cases

Civil cases, such as eviction proceedings, contract disputes, and consumer debt can pose even greater challenges—in part because there is often an experienced attorney on the other side.

> *"Explained everything in detail! My rights as a tenant and every ins & outs for a breach of contract."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

In eviction cases, tenants must file an answer with the court within five court days of being served with a summons. Self-help centers can assist in getting those documents completed and filed on time. Self-help center staff can explain the court process and provide guidance on how to negotiate with the landlord and prepare for a trial. They can also refer those who are eligible for legal aid services for representation in court.

For some landlords, such as those who may be renting a room in their home, or who have let someone stay in their home or apartment for free, or who have limited income, free legal information and assistance is hard to come by. The self-help center is a unique resource available to assist them in regaining their property since nearly all legal aid organizations limit their services to tenants.

In consumer debt and other civil cases, there are seldom tailored forms for self-represented litigants. Moreover, in such cases self-represented litigants need to navigate vocabulary and sets of procedures that are likely foreign to them. Litigants need to understand that making procedural errors can cause them to lose their cases, without consideration of the merits, and that the opposing attorney will watch carefully for those errors. Defendants in these civil matters must learn about and be prepared to provide documents for the discovery process. They must reply to requests for admissions in a timely manner or risk losing their cases and face paying attorney's fees to the other side. Without self-help assistance, it is extremely difficult for self-represented litigants to navigate all of this.

The need for legal assistance with landlord-tenant and consumer debt matters is greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. As courts plan for potential pandemic-related increases in civil law issues, self-help centers will need to help litigants—both landlords and tenants—understand and comply with the new deadlines and requirements of Assembly Bill 3088[29] and the order issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions To*

[28] Judicial Council of Cal., *Family Law: Final Report of the Elkins Family Law Implementation Task Force* (Nov. 21, 2013), *www.courts.ca.gov/documents/jc-20131213-itemX.pdf*.

[29] Stats. 2020, ch. 37, *https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB3088*.

Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19.[30] They will need to understand how to collect and defend actions to recover back rent and other debts incurred as a result of financial difficulties caused by the pandemic, and continue to adjust to what is likely to be a changing legal landscape.

Service Expansion Supported by Increased Funding

This report focuses on services provided between January 1 and December 31, 2019. Self-help center staff and service increases are calculated using the staff and services reported in fiscal year 2017–18 as a base, unless otherwise noted. The changes made by the programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 are addressed in Chapter 13.

The Budget Act of 2018 included an additional $19.1 million for self-help centers.[31] This augmentation increased total program funding from $11.2 million annually, which had been allocated since 2007, to $30.3 million annually. The augmentation was used to serve the public by increasing both attorney and non-attorney staff, better serving persons of limited English proficiency by increasing bilingual staff, opening new self-help centers and increasing hours of service in other centers, and expanding service case types including landlord-tenant, consumer debt, and guardianship cases. Consistent with the recommendations of the Chief Justice's Commission on the Future of California's Court System regarding self-represented litigants,[32] the new self-help center funding built on existing family law services and extended into civil case types including landlord-tenant, consumer debt, and probate matters.

In addition, self-help expansion was greatly enhanced by the efficiencies and innovations in service delivery developed through other judicial branch initiatives. When these service delivery models are paired with the self-help funding expansion, the program has shown it can meet the needs of the public with services that are easier for the public to access, more in-depth, and address more of the legal areas that self-represented litigants face.

Self-help funds are administered by Judicial Council program staff who provide technical assistance, monitor court programs and budgets, provide training to trial court and self-help center staff, and develop resources for self-help centers on procedures. Program staff also facilitate the statewide sharing of best practices among self-help centers by gathering feedback from users and providing data, rules, forms, and information resources.

In 2019, self-help center staff assisted over a million in-person and remote visitors who were not represented by lawyers to navigate the court system and get access to justice. Staff helped these court users understand legal processes and worked with them to identify, complete, copy, and prepare forms for filing and service. They also helped court users draft judgments and orders for

[30] 85 Fed. Reg. 55292 (Sept. 4, 2020), *www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-09-04/pdf/2020-19654.pdf*.

[31] Sen. Bill 862 (Stats. 2018, ch. 449).

[32] Commission on the Future of California's Court System, *Report to the Chief Justice* (2017), *www.courts.ca.gov/documents/futures-commission-final-report.pdf*.

signature; prepare for hearings, trials, and settlement negotiations; and understand a myriad of other court procedures that provide access to court services while allowing court systems to function more effectively. Self-help centers supported people in the courtroom, at the self-help centers, and remotely wherever it was convenient for the person seeking assistance.

With the $19.1 million increase, courts have more than doubled the number of self-help staff available to assist the public. Courts have been able to provide self-help services in more locations and increase the number of hours that services are available. They have also added new case types, languages, and methods to provide assistance. Self-help centers have also expanded the use of technology to increase efficiency. Because of the significant time and effort courts have spent improving services with the increase in self-help funds for technologies such as videoconferencing, they were in a much better position to handle the sudden, unexpected changes required by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Milestones in Self-Help Center Expansion

- August 2018—All courts were allocated the base funding of $11.2 million and the expansion funding of $19.1 million, and submitted budgets detailing how all funding would be used.
- September 2018—STARS (Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey), a web-based data collection system used by all courts to capture all services provided by self-help centers to the public, was released to courts.
- January 2019—All courts provide data on self-help services through STARS.
- July 2019—All courts provide progress reports and budgets for fiscal year 2019–20.
- December 2019—First full year of data reporting on self-help services completed. In calendar year 2019 self-help centers provided services for self-represented litigants over a million times, in-person and remotely.
- March 2020—During the COVID 19 pandemic, there was a significant reduction in the number of in-person visits to the self-help centers.
- August 2020—A significant increase in the provision of remote services allowed self-help centers to rapidly begin serving almost as many customers during the pandemic as had been served before March 2020.

Customers Served

In calendar year 2019, California's court-based self-help centers documented serving 1,011,315 self-represented litigants with family, civil, probate, and other cases.[33]

[33] Appendix B, Table 1.

These services were greatly appreciated by the public. As described in Chapter 2 regarding customer satisfaction, a survey of 6,821 persons who went to self-help centers over a four-day period in October 2019 found that 95 percent or more were satisfied with the service, received the information they needed, and knew what to do next in their cases.

Staff Expansion

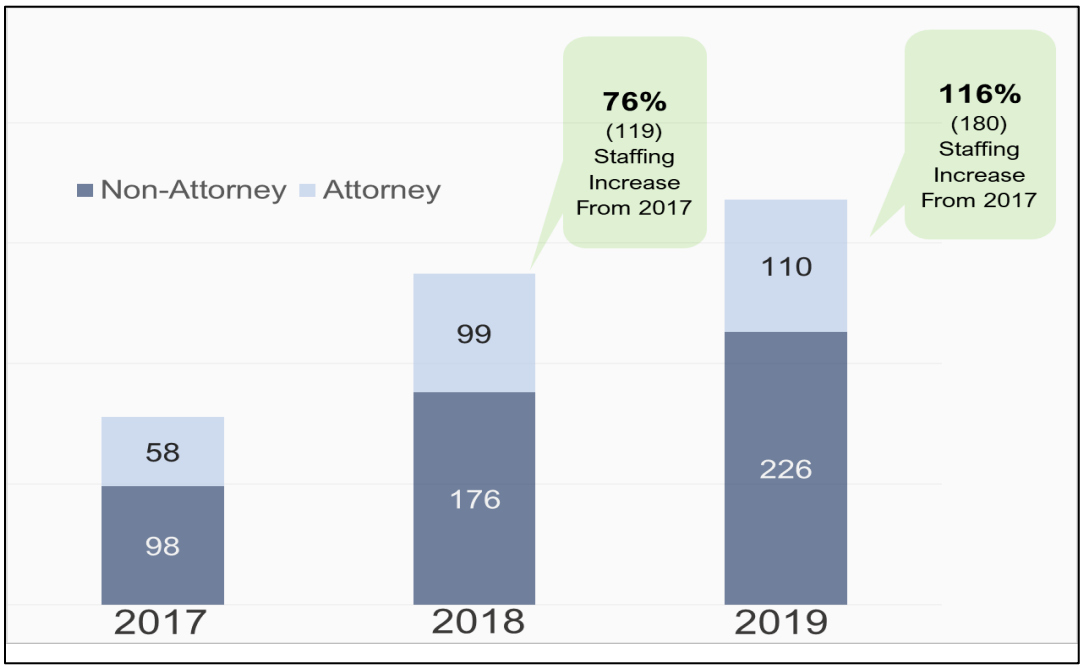
Self-help center staffing more than doubled as a result of expansion funds. Courts expended the bulk of their self-help funding allocations on self-help center staff. In fiscal year 2017–18, prior to receipt of expansion funding, self-help centers budgeted for 58 full-time equivalent (FTE) attorney staff and 98 non-attorney staff. In fiscal year 2019–20, program budgets grew to 110 FTE attorney staff and 226 non-attorney staff. With the increased staffing, self-help centers were able to increase the types of services available, the numbers of customers assisted, and the level of assistance.[34]

Nearly half of new staff hired are bilingual. Programs increased their bilingual staff in fiscal year 2018–19 and again in fiscal year 2019–20 to serve customers with limited English proficiency. Of the 180.5 new FTEs budgeted statewide in fiscal year 2019–20, 47 percent are bilingual. Chapter 7 provides further information on services to persons with limited English proficiency.

With additional bilingual staff and volunteers, the self-help centers increased their capacity to serve self-represented litigants in languages other than English. Spanish is the most common second language available. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, at least 25 courts had self-help center staff or volunteers who spoke Arabic, Armenian, Cantonese, Cambodian, Korean, Mandarin, or Vietnamese.

[34] Appendix B, Table 2.

Figure 1. Increase in FTEs from Fiscal Years 2017–18 to 2019–20



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program annual applications for fiscal year (FY) 2017–18 through 2019–20. See Appendix B, Table 2.

Figure 2. Increase in Bilingual FTEs from Fiscal Years 2017–18 to 2019–20

	Fiscal Year 17-18	Fiscal Year 18-19	Fiscal Year 19-20	
Attorney	58	99	110	43% Increase from 2017
Non-Attorney	98	176	226	48% Increase from 2017
Total	156	274	336	46% Increase from 2017

Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports FY 2017–18 through FY 2019–20. See Appendix B, Table 3.

New Locations, Technology Infrastructure Upgrades, and Expanded Service Hours

With the additional funding, self-help services have expanded the number of locations and upgraded technology to meet the needs of people throughout California. By January 1, 2020, there were 135 self-help center locations statewide serving all 58 counties. Fourteen courts added new locations or reopened centers that had been closed due to funding cutbacks during the Great Recession. These new and reopened self-help centers reported over 51,000 encounters during 2019.[35]

Self-help centers assisted people in 1,579 of California's 1,600 residential zip codes. The total population of those 21 zip codes where no one utilized a self-help center is 2,821.[36]

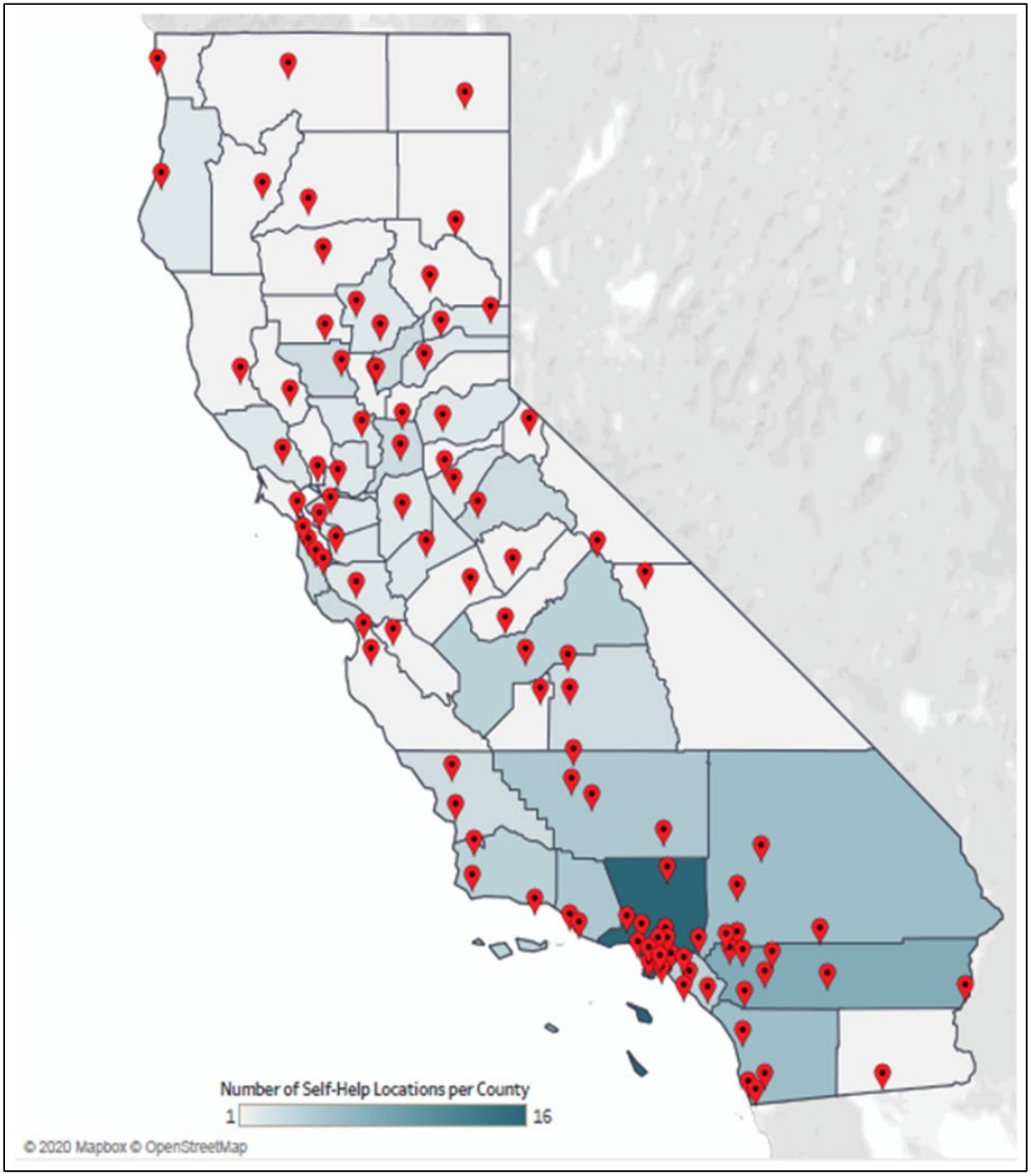
Another 10 courts reconfigured space to accommodate increased numbers of customers. Together, 41 percent of courts increased capacity by offering additional and enhanced physical locations, and 40 percent of courts reported upgrades to technology infrastructure to allow for more services to be provided online.[37]

[35] Based on 13 courts that opened or reopened new centers during 2019; one court opened a new center in 2020, for a total of 14 courts.

[36] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, California has a population of 39.51 million; 2,821 people represent 0.0000714 percent.

[37] Appendix B, Table 4.

Figure 3. Self-Help Center Locations



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports FY 2017–18 through 2019–20.

In addition to expanded service locations, approximately 40 percent of courts increased self-help center hours by an average of 13 hours each week. Courts had different goals in expanding their hours of operation, some of which are summarized below:

- Established hours for appointments for more complex services such as guardianships and child support modifications, settlement assistance, and language access services;
- Established dedicated times for specific case types including domestic violence and civil harassment restraining orders, guardianship, conservatorship, landlord-tenant, limited civil, debt collection, and expungements;
- Expanded hours for walk-ins;
- Added hours in satellite locations;
- Expanded to remote areas using videoconferencing applications and other remote service methods, such as email and phone; and
- Added hours to align with family court hearings to provide assistance in the courtroom.

Expanded Services—Case Types

As a result of the increased funding, courts assisted with new case types and/or expanded the level of assistance provided for existing case types. Beginning in fiscal year 2018–19 through and including the first quarter of fiscal year 2019–20, 59 percent of courts (34 courts) added a total of 72 case types. The most frequently added new case types included probate conservatorships, probate guardianships, landlord-tenant actions, adoptions, and responses to consumer debt/collections cases.[38]

Some courts already provided services in a full variety of case types, so they focused on increasing the comprehensiveness of their services. For example, some courts provided settlement assistance to help litigants resolve their cases outside of the courtroom.

Thirty-two courts increased their workshop offerings, including new workshop topics and/or workshop frequency. New workshops were added in a variety of topics including landlord-tenant, consumer debt, and probate matters. Courts also added workshops to help people prepare for hearings and trials. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, workshops are a cost-effective way to deliver services to self-represented litigants when they are feasible.[39]

Technology and Efficiencies

Chapter 8, Remote Services, and Chapter 9, Document Assembly, describe the technology solutions that courts implemented including self-service kiosks, automated queuing systems,

[38] Appendix B, Tables 4 and 5.

[39] Appendix B, Table 4.

videoconferencing, online workshops, text reminders, live chat, and automated forms completion programs.[40]

Self-help centers have been incubators for innovation—identifying needs and piloting a variety of solutions to meet the diverse needs of the litigants they serve. The centers leveraged resources to provide comprehensive services, including those piloted through court innovation grants awarded to courts in 2017.[41] (See Chapter 14 for further discussion of efficiencies.)

Enhanced Procedural Fairness

Besides supporting legal fairness by helping litigants prepare their legal documents, understand the court process, and prepare for hearings and trials, self-help centers also support procedural fairness.

Procedural fairness refers to court users' perceptions regarding the fairness and transparency of the court system by which their disputes are considered and resolved (as distinguished from the outcomes of their cases). Perceptions of procedural fairness are also significantly affected by the quality of treatment court users receive during every interaction with the court.[42] Consistent with research in this field, a study commissioned by the Judicial Council found that court user satisfaction with, and levels of trust and confidence in, the courts are more closely linked with whether they feel that they were treated fairly than whether they won their case. When litigants are satisfied with the court process and how they were treated, they are more likely to comply with court orders.[43]

Self-help centers support procedural fairness by addressing the four key components that affect court users' perceptions of whether the court process was fair: respect, voice, neutrality, and trust.[44]

---

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] Budget Act of 2016; see "Judicial Council Approves Process for Awarding $25 Million for Court Innovations," news release Aug. 25, 2016, *California Courts Newsroom, https://newsroom.courts.ca.gov/news/judicial-council-approves-process-awarding-25-million-court-innovations*.

[42] Judicial Council of Cal., *Procedural Fairness in the California Courts* (2019) at p. 1, *www.courts.ca.gov/documents/profair_brochure_092507.pdf*.

[43] Judicial Council of Cal., *Procedural Fairness in California: Initiatives, Challenges, and Recommendations* (May 2011), pp. 1–2, *www.courts.ca.gov/documents/Procedural_Fairness_In_California_May_2011.pdf*.

[44] *Procedural Fairness in the California Courts* at p. 2.

Respect

"People react positively when they feel that they are treated with politeness, dignity and respect and that their rights are recognized. In addition, helping people understand how things work and what they must do is strongly associated with respect and court user satisfaction."[45]

> *"The amount of respect, understanding and compassion was amazing.*
>
> *[I liked the] way I was treated with respect and dignity."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Self-help centers support the courts by helping people understand how things work and what they must do. They are a designated hub in the courts where people can get the information they need. In the survey of 6,821 self-help center customers conducted over four days in October 2019, 98 percent of the respondents said they were treated with respect.[46]

Voice

"People want the opportunity to tell their side of the story, to explain their situation and views to an authority who listens carefully."[47]

Self-help centers listen to people's concerns in a respectful and responsive way. Resolving legal problems is stressful and often filled with emotion. The issues often involve high stakes—custody of children, the potential for homelessness and/or the loss of money and property. By being a safe space where people go to express their concerns, needs, and fears, self-help centers help make people feel that they are being heard by the system.

> *"I didn't feel like just a number. My concerns were listened to and a great amount of time, effort and patience was extended to me.*
>
> *The staff were kind & actively listened to me!"*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Neutrality

"People are more likely to accept court decisions when those in authority act with fairness and neutrality (i.e., users were treated equally). Users also respond more positively to court decisions when the importance of facts is emphasized and the reasons for a decision have been clearly explained."[48]

> *"I was walked through all my forms so that I could fill them out correctly, questions were all answered.*
>
> *I did not feel rushed and they explained every single line on the forms to me."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

By providing people with reasonable expectations and helping them understand what the court can—and cannot—address, self-help staff help people focus on the issues that can be resolved. Self-help centers provide people with impartial

---

[45] *Procedural Fairness in the California Courts* at p. 3.

[46] Appendix B, Table 44.

[47] *Procedural Fairness in the California Courts* at p. 4.

[48] *Id.* at p. 5.

information and explanations that help them understand the reasons for the court's actions, decisions, and expectations, which support their perception that the court is neutral and fair.

Trust

"People observe behavior or look for actions to indicate that they can trust the character and sincerity of those in authority and that those in authority are aware of and sincerely concerned with their needs."[49]

High levels of customer satisfaction and customer comments indicate that people coming to self-help centers perceived that staff genuinely wanted to help them. By explaining the legal process, the court process, and the role of judges and court staff, self-help centers also help increase understanding of, and trust and confidence in, the entire court process.

> *"The person who helped me with my paperwork was very kind, and very helpful. She made me feel that everything was going to be okay.*
>
> *I was treated with common courtesy and respect and given a lot of information about my situation. They made me feel like they completely understood and were here to help."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Not Just a Public Service

Self-help centers not only provide enormous assistance to the public, they also help judges and court operations staff work more efficiently. Self-help centers ensure that the legal paperwork is legible, accurate, and complete, and help ensure that litigants address the issues that the judge will be looking for. Self-help staff explain the court process so litigants know the next steps and can eliminate unnecessary hearings that have to be rescheduled due to procedural problems. Self-help centers provide a resource to which judges and court clerks can refer self-represented litigants for help with forms and court procedures, minimizing frustration and wasted time. Collectively, self-help centers enable the court to function with more fairness and greater efficiency.

By increasing self-represented litigants' perceptions of both legal and procedural fairness, court self-help centers address key goals of the *Strategic Plan for California's Judicial Branch* including Access, Fairness, and Diversity, and Quality of Justice and Service to the Public.[50]

[49] *Id.* at p. 6.

[50] Judicial Council of Cal., "The Strategic Plan for California's Judicial Branch" (undated), www.courts.ca.gov/3045.htm.

CHAPTER 2: Self-Help Customer Satisfaction

"I couldn't have done it without them. Now my children are safe."
– Customer Satisfaction Survey

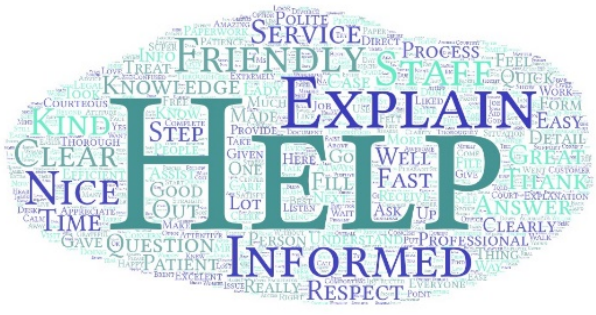
An important measure of effectiveness is the experience of the people whom self-help centers are helping. It is important to know that those served by self-help centers are confident that they received helpful information and know the next steps to take in their cases.

This chapter focuses on the results of a statewide survey of self-help centers that was conducted in October 2019 to assess customers' satisfaction with the self-help services they received. Based on this in-person survey involving 6,821 customers in 53 counties over a four-day period, customer satisfaction with self-help center services is extremely high. Ninety-six percent of customers surveyed strongly agreed, or agreed, that they were satisfied with services overall.

Survey participants were at the self-help center to be assisted through one-on-one services (56.4 percent) and triage—an assessment of their needs and brief services (30.6 percent). Seven percent were served in workshops; others received multiple services. Of the 6,821 people surveyed, the majority sought assistance with family law (62.0 percent) or civil cases such as landlord-tenant and consumer debt (21.4 percent).

Survey participants were very satisfied with all aspects of service measured on the self-help customer satisfaction survey, including staff knowledge, helpfulness, and friendliness. The vast majority of participants also strongly agreed that they had received the information they needed, and that they knew what they needed to do next in their legal cases. Participants were equally satisfied regardless of the type of case they needed help with or the way the service was delivered. Satisfaction was particularly high with staff professionalism, knowledge, and helpfulness. When asked how services could be improved, many people had no recommendations. Those who did respond generally suggested the need for additional staffing, particularly if they had to wait for services.

Customer Satisfaction Survey



The written survey asked two open-ended questions: "What did you like most about the services you received?" and "In what way could services be improved?" Additionally, five questions sought self-help customers' evaluations about the quality and helpfulness of the services and staff. Respondents were asked to rate each

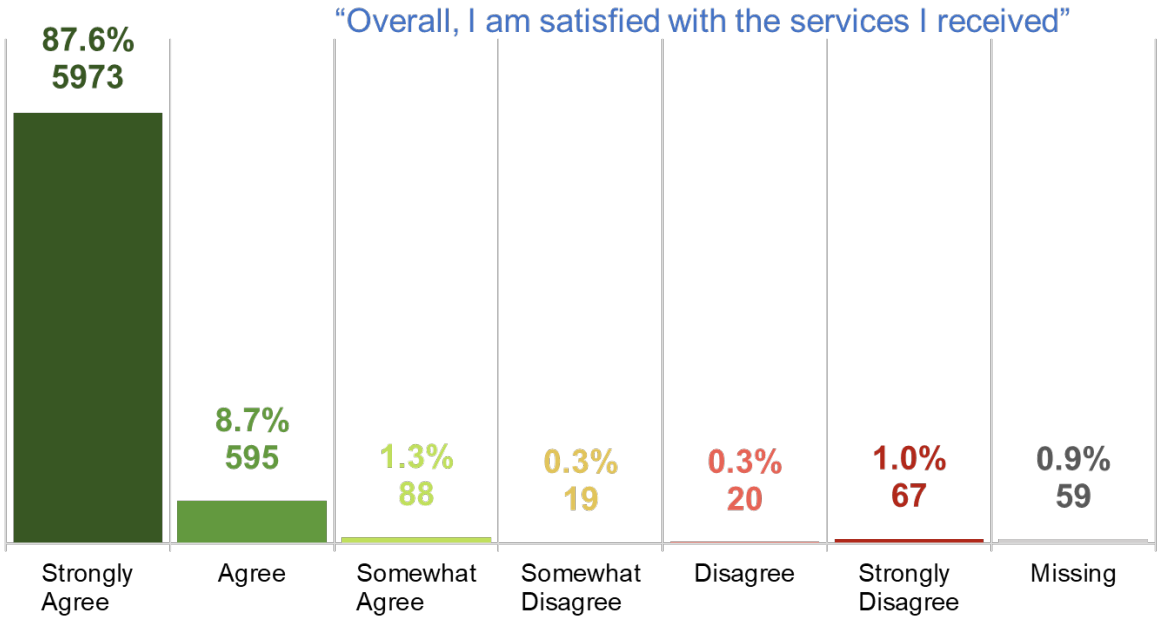
item on a six-point scale: strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.[51]

Overall Satisfaction with Services

> *"They have taken a lot of the fear out of going to court by myself."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

When asked to rate the self-help center services they received, 96 percent agreed that they were satisfied with the services overall, including 88 percent who strongly agreed. In response to the question about what they liked most about the services, survey participants described many positive experiences with the assistance they had received.

Figure 4. Satisfied with Services Received



"I want to take time to say thank you to the staff for helping get out of an abusive marriage after 12 years of abuse. Thank you for helping with my new beginning."

"One-on-one help was amazing! never expected for the help to be so complete and helped more than I ever imagined. Please don't ever change this service."

"This is a vital service & much appreciated."

"It makes the world of positive difference. Thank you for having this!!!"

"I am extremely happy with all the help and guidance provided regarding my guardianship case. I appreciate the help and knowledge of all the staff."

Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 48.

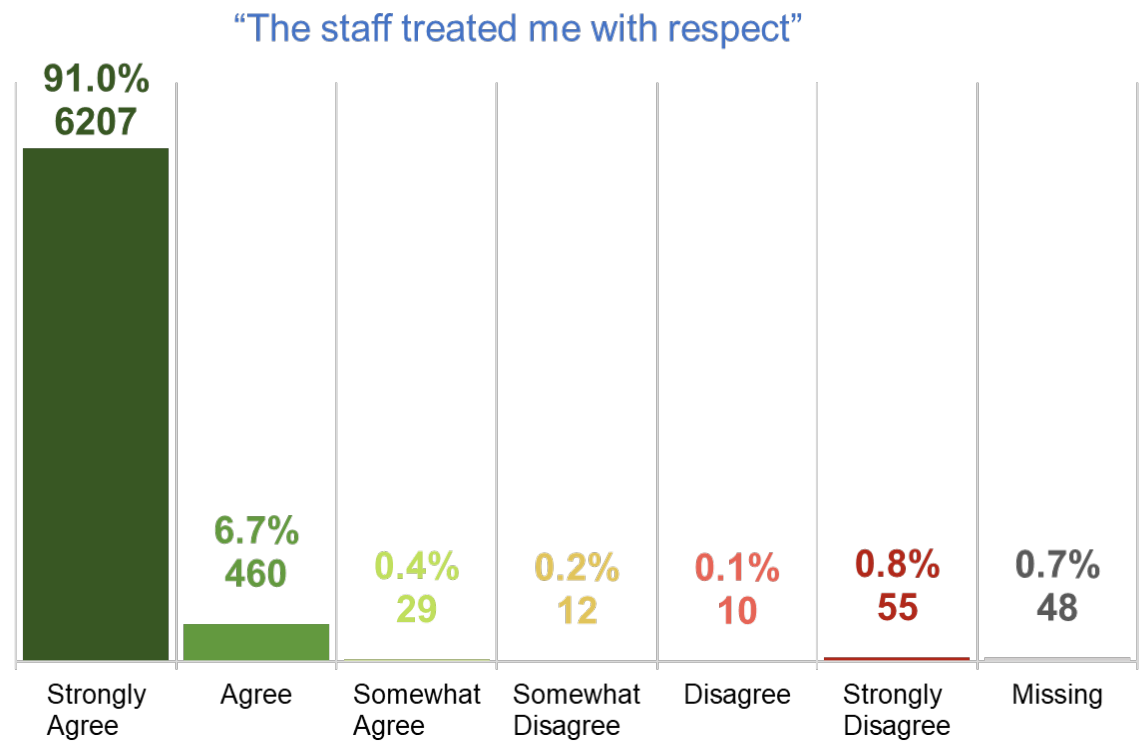
[51] See Appendix A for study methodology.

Satisfaction with Staff

Nearly all survey participants were pleased with how they were treated by staff and with how well staff explained things to them. Ninety-eight percent agreed that staff treated them with respect, with 91 percent strongly agreeing.

When asked to describe what they liked most about the services, survey respondents praised the friendliness, helpfulness, knowledge, and skill of self-help center staff members. Comments about staff also demonstrated the many non-legal benefits of the services. These included relief and peace of mind for self-represented litigants dealing with complicated, stressful situations. In some cases, just having someone listen to them made a difference.

Figure 5. Treated with Respect



"The relief that someone is able to help you step-by-step through the process, as it is an overwhelming one to go through. Very kind and very helpful. She made me feel that everything was going to be ok."

"Professionalism A+/Personality A+/Knowledge A+/Patience A+/Attitude A+. Couldn't have finalized any of these cases without help of the 3 people in this self-help office. Thank You!"

"The amount of respect, understanding, and compassion was amazing."

"I was treated with common courtesy, respect and given a lot of information about my situation. They made me feel like they completely understood and were here to help."

"Everyone in the office is helpful, pleasant and knowledgeable. A wonderful government resource."

Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 44.

Satisfaction with Information

One important goal of self-help services is to ensure self-represented litigants leave the self-help center with the information and understanding they need in order to proceed in their legal matters. Ninety-six percent of survey respondents agreed that they had the information

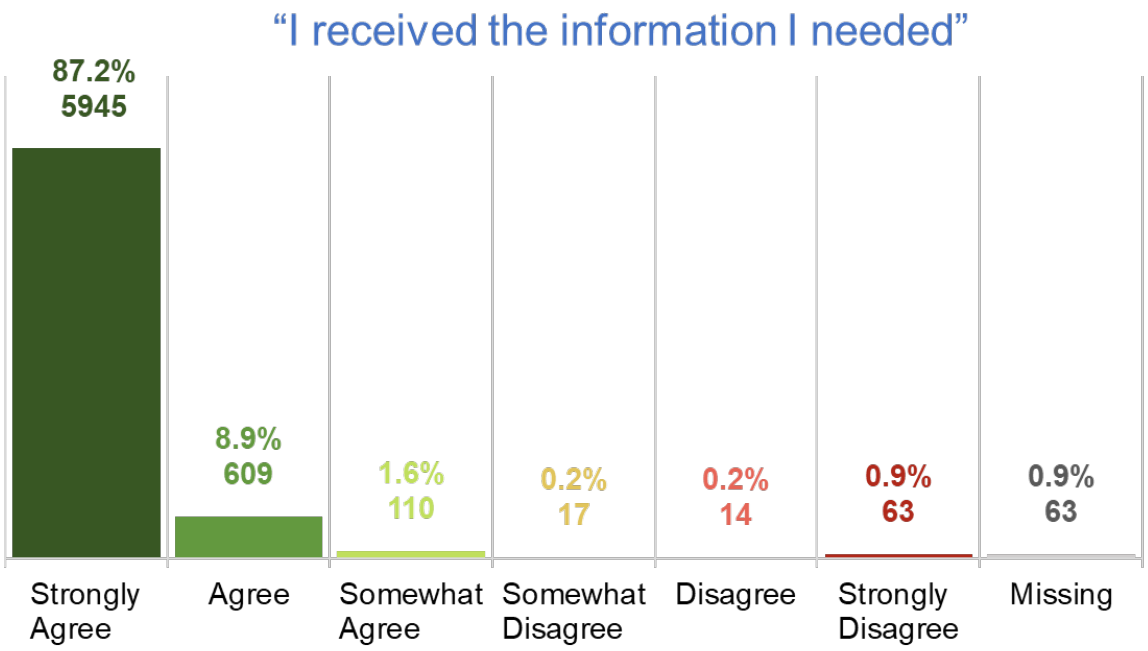
"I am walking away more confident in what I need to do in court."

–Customer Satisfaction Survey

they needed, including 87 percent who strongly agreed. Ninety-five percent agreed that they knew what they needed to do next with their cases, including 84 percent who strongly agreed.

Multiple survey participants commented regarding the effectiveness of services in providing education and resources to self-represented litigants. Survey respondents stated that they left with a better understanding of the court process, the forms they needed to use, and how to properly complete the paperwork.

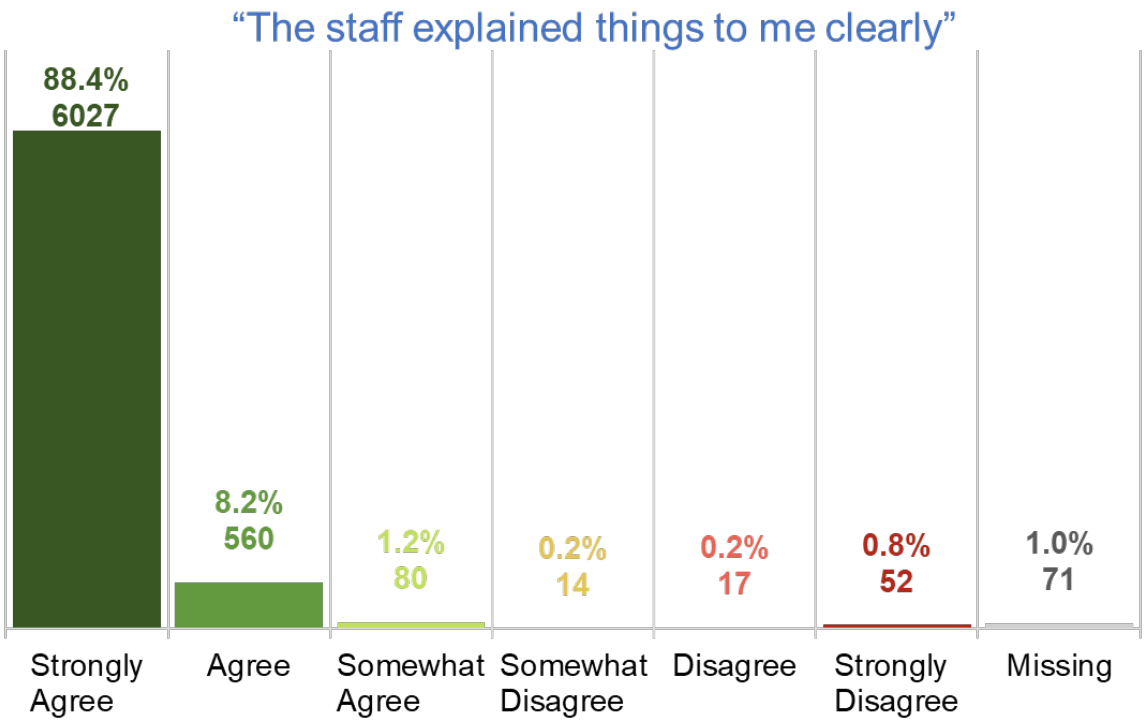
Figure 6. Received Information Needed



Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 45.

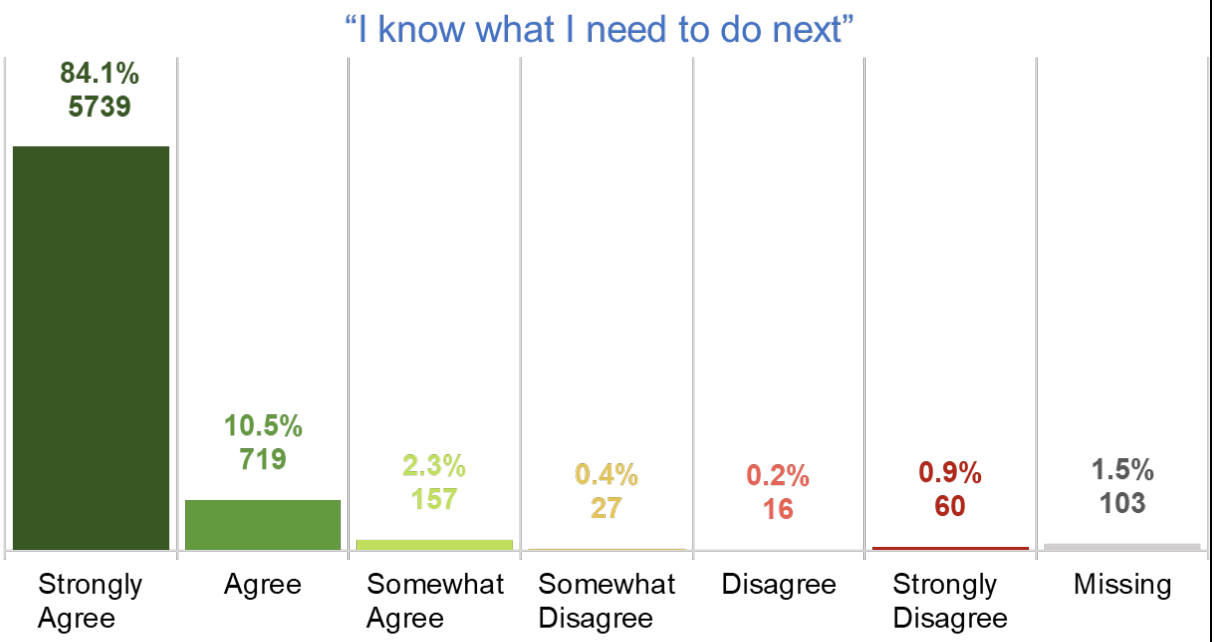
Similarly, 97 percent of respondents agreed that staff had explained things to them clearly, with 88 percent strongly agreeing.

Figure 7. Staff Explained Things Clearly



Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 44.

Figure 8. Know What to Do Next



"She is very knowledgeable, and I am walking away more confident in what I need to do in court."

"Staff were clear about what I was missing & what forms I needed to fill out. Highlighted what parts of the forms I needed to fill out which is extremely helpful."

"She followed up on a case I gave up on - and helped me file the proper paperwork. I am so grateful to her and the Self-Help Facility."

"Helped me thoroughly understand what's to be expected in my case and how to follow through."

"She went out of her way to look up dates and times for me to make sure I filed everything on time."

Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 44.

Areas for Improvement

> *"Definitely need more staff. The staff is great, but the need is overwhelming. Thank you."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Survey participants were asked how services could be improved. Many participants stated that services were already great, and no changes were needed. Of those who did have suggestions for program improvement, the most common themes identified the need for more resources to better serve the volume of self-help center customers, including more staff and expanded hours.

For example, survey respondents commented on a lack of staff to help all of the waiting customers, which often resulted in long wait times, and sometimes the inability to receive assistance or the need to return to the self-help center on another day:

- *"Funds for more staff. They are really busy helping everyone."*
- *"They need more money to hire more staff so they can be open five days a week."*

Center hours sometimes made the services inaccessible for customers because they could not come in during work hours or had difficulty taking days off work when they had to return to the self-help center multiple times. Some survey participants commented that they would like the center to be open longer hours, during lunch, or more days of the week. Some also expressed the wish that more services and information could be provided online, to save them a trip to the courthouse:

- *"Perhaps having longer hours. Some of us work until late and it would be easier to come by closer to 4 pm than it is to come in the mornings."*
- *"Open more hours, offer online help or by phone help."*

One final area mentioned was the lack of privacy in many self-help centers. Some commenters were uncomfortable with the possibility that personal information about one's legal case might be overheard by self-help customers at other windows or in the lobby.[52]

- *"Would like the clinic space set up in a way that allows for more privacy."*
- *"More one on one time; make them private."*

Interestingly, although concerns about various aspects of services were raised by survey participants, these problems did not appear to reduce their level of satisfaction with the services overall.

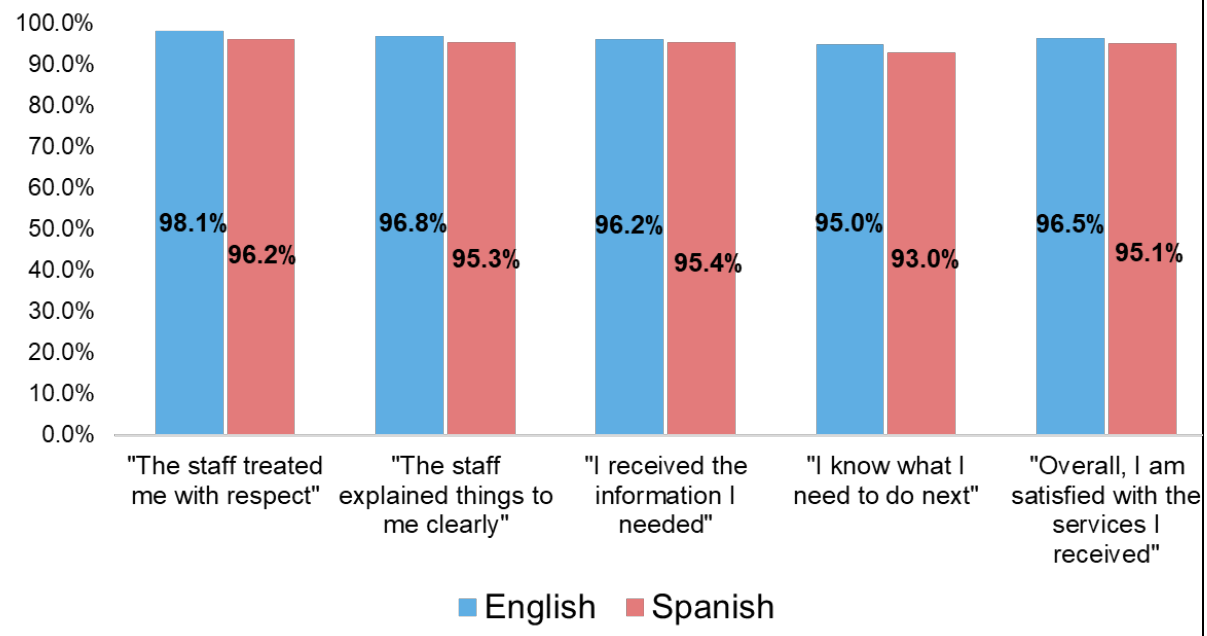
[52] Since self-help centers do not form an attorney-client relationship, there is no breach of confidentiality. However, it is an issue for centers to consider in their design.

Customer Satisfaction Results by Language Used to Take Survey

Customer satisfaction surveys were available in English and Spanish. Across all responding counties, 5,710 surveys in English (84 percent) and 1,111 surveys in Spanish (16 percent) were submitted.[53]

As shown in Figure 9, there were no differences in customer satisfaction between English-language and Spanish-language survey respondents. Across both groups, nearly all participants agreed or strongly agreed that staff treated them with respect and explained things to them clearly. English and Spanish speakers also equally agreed that they knew what they needed to do next with their legal issues. This is a key finding for Spanish-speaking litigants, who may have additional barriers to understanding the court process and completing court forms that are written in English.

Figure 9. Overall Satisfaction by Language



Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 46.

When asked what they liked most about the services, many Spanish-speaking customers indicated that they appreciated the fact that they received help in their native language:

[53] Note that surveys were not available in other languages, therefore the results only apply to non-English speakers who speak Spanish.

- *"Muy satisfecha y aber resivido en mi idioma. Gracias."*
  [Very satisfied to have received help in my language. Thank you.]
- *"Me trataron muy bien y me explicaron todo en mi idioma ademas de resolver todas mis dudas de manera muy clara*."
  [They treated me very well and explained everything to me in my language in addition to resolving all my concerns in a very clear way.]
- *"Que sea en Español para poder entender 100 percent."*
  [That it was in Spanish so I could understand 100 percent]

Spanish-language speakers in some counties also expressed a need for more bilingual staff to assist and more workshops conducted in Spanish:

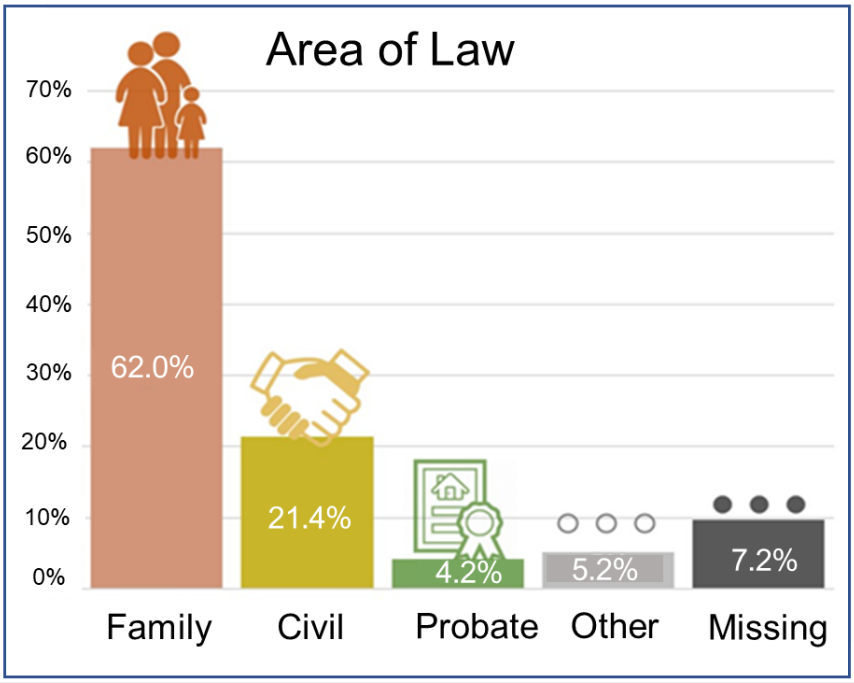
- *"Mas ayudantes en español o que esten desponible mas temposos durante la semana."*
  [More helpers in Spanish or if they could be available at more times during the week.]
- *"Pues es muy buena la ayuda no ocupan canviar nada sobre eso solo que si me gustaria que tuvieran mas personal que hable espanol."*
  [Well the service is very good they don't need to change anything about that—it's just that I would like them to have more staff who speak Spanish.]

Customer Satisfaction by Area of Law

Of the 6,821 participants, the majority sought assistance with family law (62.0 percent) or civil cases (21.4 percent). Smaller percentages sought help with probate cases (4.2 percent) or other areas (5.2 percent), including traffic and record expungements

Assistance with family law matters, especially divorce/dissolution of marriage and child custody matters were the most common services received by the participants in the customer satisfaction survey.

Figure 10. Area of Law Where Respondents Sought Help



Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 42.

A comparison across areas of legal assistance found no differences in satisfaction among those who sought help for family, civil, or probate cases; satisfaction was high across all case types.

- *"This is an amazing service. I'm so surprised that I was able to get all the information and direction I need to complete my divorce. The staff is exceptionally kind!!"*
- *"I have specific action steps to finalize my divorce."*
- *"I had a lot of different cases I wanted to file like civil expungement, eviction, a few more. She explained everything for all of them."*
- *"I am extremely happy with all the help and guidance provided regarding my guardianship case. I appreciate the help and knowledge of all the staff."*
- *"En la forma que te explica y las obciones que te dan para que sea mas facil para uno y mas rapido el proceso tambien te aclaran cuanto tiempo puedes tardar en el proceso."* [The way in which they explained things and the options they give you make things easier and faster. They also clarify how long the process is going to take.]

Conclusion

Respondents to the October 2019 customer satisfaction survey reported strong satisfaction with the self-help services they received. Not only did people feel that they were treated with respect, 96 percent felt that they received the information that they needed and that the staff had explained things clearly to them and 95 percent reported that they knew what they needed to do next.

In addition to the survey research described in this chapter, user experience testing has become an important component of self-help services, allowing for detailed feedback from the public on the best online experience for court forms and web-based applications. User experience data and more frequent, targeted customer satisfaction testing will continue to inform self-help center services in the future.

CHAPTER 3: Triage and Brief Services

"So helpful, I felt really lost not knowing what to do and now I got all the information I needed."[54]

People who are trying to represent themselves in court often find themselves in the courthouse unsure of what steps to take. They may have received legal papers that are bewildering. They may be missing a document that must be filed with the clerk, or need help finding the right form. Some people just need someone to explain the problem. Often, these self-represented litigants may have questions about what the judge has ordered and what they need to do next. These questions can often be cleared up quickly by trained self-help staff in a brief service that takes five minutes or less.

Similarly, people often have quick questions when they are working on their forms at home. Others would like to ask a quick question about basic court procedures. These questions can often be answered by a short phone call.

The legal system is complicated. It is not always easy to determine what type of case needs to be filed, what the status of that case is, what next steps to take, or how to take those steps. It is hard to even know what kind of questions to ask or what kind of help is needed. Sometimes all that is needed to help clear the confusion is a little information. Each time staff in a self-help center can address these kinds of brief issues, they not only help the person who was confused, they also assist the court, reducing burdens on the judges and clerks, by keeping small questions from becoming big problems.

Number of Customers Served

Brief services are an extremely common and very valuable function of self-help services; they include giving quick answers, making referrals, answering phone calls, and addressing courtroom issues that can be handled in five minutes or less. Between January 1 and December 31, 2019, self-help centers reported providing these brief services 444,924 times.[55]

Delivering Brief Services

Questions often come up while people are at the courthouse, so dropping into the self-help center is an invaluable in-person resource. A growing number of courts are providing assistance over the phone and online as well. Phone calls often take less time than coming to the court for both the litigants and the self-help staff. Coming to court could involve arranging for childcare or time

[54] Customer Satisfaction Survey.

[55] Appendix B, Table 1.

off from work, transportation time to the courthouse, finding public parking, waiting in line for another 15 to 20 minutes, and other inconveniences.

> *"Everything was made simple and understandable."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Brief services typically involve listening to the court customer's question, checking their file, identifying what steps to take next, and giving them an instructional packet or signing them up for a workshop. It may involve a quick review of paperwork that the litigant worked on at home and brought back for review. Brief services can be as easy as directing people to the most appropriate place for them to get the assistance they need. It may also include explaining a court order, and what steps the person needs to take to enforce or comply with that order.

Triage

Both brief and more extended visits to the self-help center begin with triage. In many courts the term "assessment" is used instead. Triage assesses the client's needs, including the steps to take in opening a case or proceeding with an existing case. Triage also identifies the appropriate service for the client, including one-on-one individual service, a workshop, or document assembly. The urgency of the case and need for language services or trauma-informed services are identified, and finally the ability of the self-help center to provide the appropriate service is evaluated.[56]

> *"The people really heard me out and helped find solutions for me."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

For example, some individuals require extensive one-on-one assistance while others have the capacity to access resources on computers to prepare pleadings with minimal guidance. Some court users may be functionally illiterate[57] and require assistance filling out each box and blank line on a form, while others will simply need an instructional packet. Trained clerks and volunteers can assist with some matters, while others will require the assistance of an experienced attorney.

> *"She was really helpful and gave me the correct paperwork that I needed to complete in order to continue with my case."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Triage is essential to help identify emergencies requiring immediate, often intense, levels of direct assistance for quick preparation of pleadings for an emergency order. A case that has been through the

[56] Kathleen Dixon and Margaret Little, "Self-Help Centers: The Approach of the Los Angeles Superior Court," p. 67, in *Innovations for Self-Represented Litigants,* Bonnie Rose Hough and Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, eds. (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts 2011); see *Family Law Resource Guidelines: Differentiated Caseflow Management in Family Law* (Administrative Office of the Courts, 2010), p. 14.

[57] Approximately 15 percent of the U.S. population is functionally illiterate, meaning that they are unable to successfully determine the meaning of sentences, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information, or complete simple forms. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Adult Literacy in the United States," *NCES Data Point* (July 2019), https://nces.ed.gov/datapoints/2019179.asp.

self-help center's triage process allows staff to explain the level of urgency required for the judge to grant an emergency order.

The intake process for individuals using the self-help center is often multilayered, and triage may be included in addition to one-on-one or workshop services described in Chapters 4 and 5. An intake worker can assess the type of case and case status, whether the person will need language assistance, and that individual's apparent level of capacity and stress.

Customer Satisfaction with Brief Services and Triage

It is significant to note that, in the October 2019 Customer Satisfaction Survey, customer satisfaction was high even for people who received only triage or brief services. In fact, many commenters noted their appreciation for the brief services provided by self-help.[58]

> *"Fast, polite, and thorough."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

[58] See Appendix B, Table 48.

CHAPTER 4: One-on-One, In-Person Visits

"She treated me with respect, which made me comfortable to tell her the truth of the case. She not only helped me with the documents, she gave me peace of mind by explaining what I need to do next."[59]

The services discussed in this chapter are provided during individual, in-person visits by a self-represented litigant to the self-help center, during which the staff provide one-on-one assistance to the litigant. The growth in and improvement of these services is a direct outcome of the self-help center expansion. Self-help staff also assist litigants remotely by phone, videoconference and other platforms, which are discussed in Chapter 8.

> *"I had many questions, and all of them were answered in detail and they let me know what to do step by step. Great people and very knowledgeable."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Services provided during these visits range in length from 20 minutes to over an hour. These services focus on providing legal information, helping to complete forms, or even helping a litigant to complete, copy, and prepare documents for multiple filings or a long cause hearing or trial. Due to the complexity of some cases, repeat visits and consultations may be required.

Self-help centers provided one-on-one, in-person services to 466,343 visitors in calendar year 2019.[60] Self-help center staff spend a range of time on customer visits, based on the complexity of the service provided. When asked to estimate the time spent during a customer visit, 33 courts responded.[61] The averages of these estimates are:

Service Provided by Appointment or to Walk-ins:

Self-help center walk-ins ..... 23.1 minutes

Appointments for service ..... 51.4 minutes

Service Provided by Case Type:

Probate cases ..... 76.5 minutes

Family law cases ..... 43.3 minutes

Civil cases ..... 39.4 minutes

[59] Customer Satisfaction Survey.

[60] Appendix B, Table 1.

[61] Appendix B, Table 6.

Every court provides one-on-one services as part of their model, and nearly all[62] customers receive at least a short intake to determine the nature of their legal issue, the status of their case, and what type of available services would be appropriate. One-on-one services, which are often by appointment, are essential for more complex matters. One-on-one time is also beneficial for persons who need additional assistance as a result of physical limitations, literacy challenges, limited English proficiency, and other issues that may require additional levels of service.

> *"People come to court scared, confused and needing help and leave with solutions, paperwork, and a real sense that they can help themselves get through whatever issue they have. Even if we can't help them, we research who can help them and give the individual as much information as we can find.*
>
> *There is absolutely no substitute for the personal touch we give to each and every person who comes in during a very stressful time of their lives. While we do utilize every possible computer assistance program and inform them of all the information available to them on the internet, with issues so sensitive as divorce, custody, losing your housing, or harassment. Having a caring, supportive self-help employee can be the difference between someone giving up and someone feeling empowered to take control of their lives."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Director*

However, few courts are able to meet the demand for services by only providing one-on-one assistance. As a result, they have been developing workshops to serve more people. As recently as five years ago, in 2015, 40 counties (69 percent) reported that the only service method they used was one-on-one services. By June 2019, only 24 counties (41 percent) provided one-on-one services as their only method of assistance. Those courts are in rural counties that have specific challenges with workshops, as described in Chapter 11 on rural services.[63]

Use of One-on-One Services Varies Across Case Types

One-on-one services are most often provided in cases involving domestic violence and other types of abuse or harassment where litigants seek protection. These cases often require immediate assistance and cannot wait for a scheduled workshop. Litigants also require assistance preparing written declarations describing the abuse, which can be very challenging for them to draft on their own without the patience and professionalism of a self-help center staff member who can ask trauma-informed questions to elicit the story—which is almost impossible to do in a workshop format. Since these written declarations tend to serve as the documentation that courts rely on for a temporary order of protection, it is critical that the person in crisis properly explains their need for the order. Sharing information about traumatic events is extremely challenging for many people; these discussions may trigger strong emotions including fear, shame, and anger. Persons seeking orders of protection are often highly traumatized and unable to absorb information in a workshop setting. Self-help staff are trained to work with these survivors to help

[62] Some courts allow customers to sign up for workshops online without an initial screening.

[63] Appendix B, Table 7.

them get their paperwork in order, often going the extra distance with someone who cannot manage the system because of their trauma. Self-help services are a critical step forward to receiving protection.

Another case type, small claims assistance, is one of the case types less often handled with one-on-one assistance. The paperwork and court processes for small claims cases are uncomplicated enough that they can be addressed by phone, which occurs one-third of the time. Unlike domestic violence cases, in small claims cases, the need to address the issues immediately is not as great, and emotions are generally not running as high.

Michael came to the self-help center for assistance in obtaining a domestic violence restraining order. After explaining his story about his ex-girlfriend's continuing abuse, both verbal and physical, he revealed to the staff member working with him that he is illiterate and has PTSD, which has impaired his ability to focus and impacted his memory retention.

As he could not write, the staff member walked him through every form and filled out the forms for him. The staff member made a step-by-step list for him to follow throughout his case.

The next day Michael came back to the center and admitted that he had lost his paperwork. This happened two more times after his first visit. At that point, center staff went to the clerk's office with him to file his paperwork and walked him through the next steps of the process so that he could get the protection he needed.

Analyzing One-on-One Services

The one-on-one services described in this chapter were reported by courts using the Self-Help Tracking and Recording Survey (STARS) and cover all in-person customer visits that required one-on-one services recorded in calendar year 2019. The chapter excludes in-depth services provided remotely and workshops.

In calendar year 2019, courts recorded 466,343 total visits to the self-help center that involved one-on-one services. Of the total, 444,575 had indicated the case type addressed during the visit (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Calendar Year 2019 Self-Help Center One-on-One, In-Person Visits by Case Type

Case Type	One-on-One In-Person Visits
Family Law	345,126
Civil	81,399
Probate	15,857
Other Case Types	2,193
Total	444,575

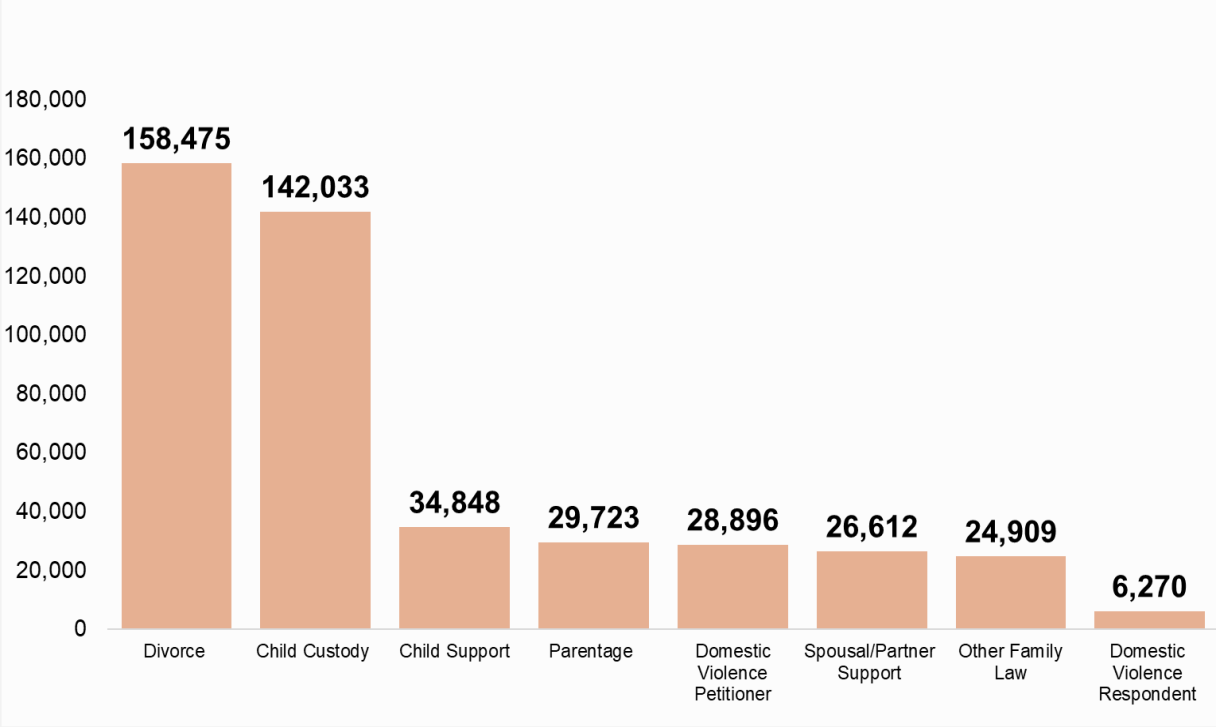
Source: STARS Customer Information Database. See Appendix B, Table 10.

A single case type may involve services involving more than one topic. As shown in Figure 12 below, although services were provided in 345,126 one-on-one, in-person visits for family law cases, family law topics—ranging from child support to domestic violence—were addressed during the visits a total of 451,766 times. The remainder of this chapter analyzes data at the level of topics addressed during the visit.

Family Law

Across the state of California, there were 345,126 visits to self-help centers that involved in-person, one-on-one assistance in family law matters. Family law topics were addressed 451,766 times during these visits (Figure 12). Among all family law visits, divorce was the topic addressed most often.

Figure 12. Number of Times Family Law Topics Were Addressed in 2019



Source: STARS Customer Information Database. See Appendix B, Table 11. Family law topics were addressed a total of 451,766 times during 345,126 visits.

> *"Fast and made everything easier for me to get my divorce completed."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

In addition to being the most requested case type for one-on-one assistance in self-help centers, family law also has the greatest number of repeat visitors. Of the individuals seeking one-on-one assistance with a family law matter, 59 percent reported having been to the self-help center previously, compared to 42 percent of those receiving assistance in other areas of law. This is likely because divorce cases require multiple steps, from the initial filing to disclosures, and then forms to finalize the divorce by default, agreement, or trial. This may also be because, in dissolutions that include child custody arrangements, situations with children change over time. Parents may lose their jobs and need to modify their child support orders or children may change schools and the parents may need help to come up with new custody and visitation orders.

> *"They were very helpful. I learned a lot about what I can ask for, for my custody case."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

While many medium and large courts offer workshops for basic divorce proceedings, participants in focus groups and interviews stated that one-on-one assistance remains most effective for cases with more complicated legal and procedural issues, and for situations where the litigant is experiencing severe trauma. It is difficult to effectively run a workshop when a participant is in tears, visibly angry, or needs to dominate the room. Self-help centers often see people at a time of severe stress, and one-on-one services may be needed to calm the litigant enough that they can retain the information.

Civil

There were 81,399 visits to self-help centers that involved in-person, one-on-one assistance in civil law. Civil law topics were addressed a total of 84,728 times during these encounters (Figure 13).

Civil case topics include landlord-tenant matters (unlawful detainer), consumer issues (breach of contract and collections), civil harassment, name and/or gender change, elder abuse, and small claims.

Landlord-Tenant

There were 29,681 in-person visits for one-on-one assistance with landlord-tenant matters in 2019. In these cases services were provided to both landlords and tenants, although the majority of such services were provided to tenants who were facing eviction. (See Figure 13.)

Of the landlords assisted by self-help centers, the majority were either renting out a room in their homes or had no more than two units for rent. These are individuals who did not have the funds to hire an attorney and were facing potential foreclosure or their own eviction if they did not receive rent. Because most legal aid programs only serve tenants, self-help centers are a crucial service for low-income landlords.

For tenants facing eviction (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and related laws including Assembly Bill 3088), answers to eviction notices generally had to be submitted within five days of receiving them.[64] Due to the emergency nature of evictions, 93 percent of self-help center encounters with tenants are one-on-one.[65]

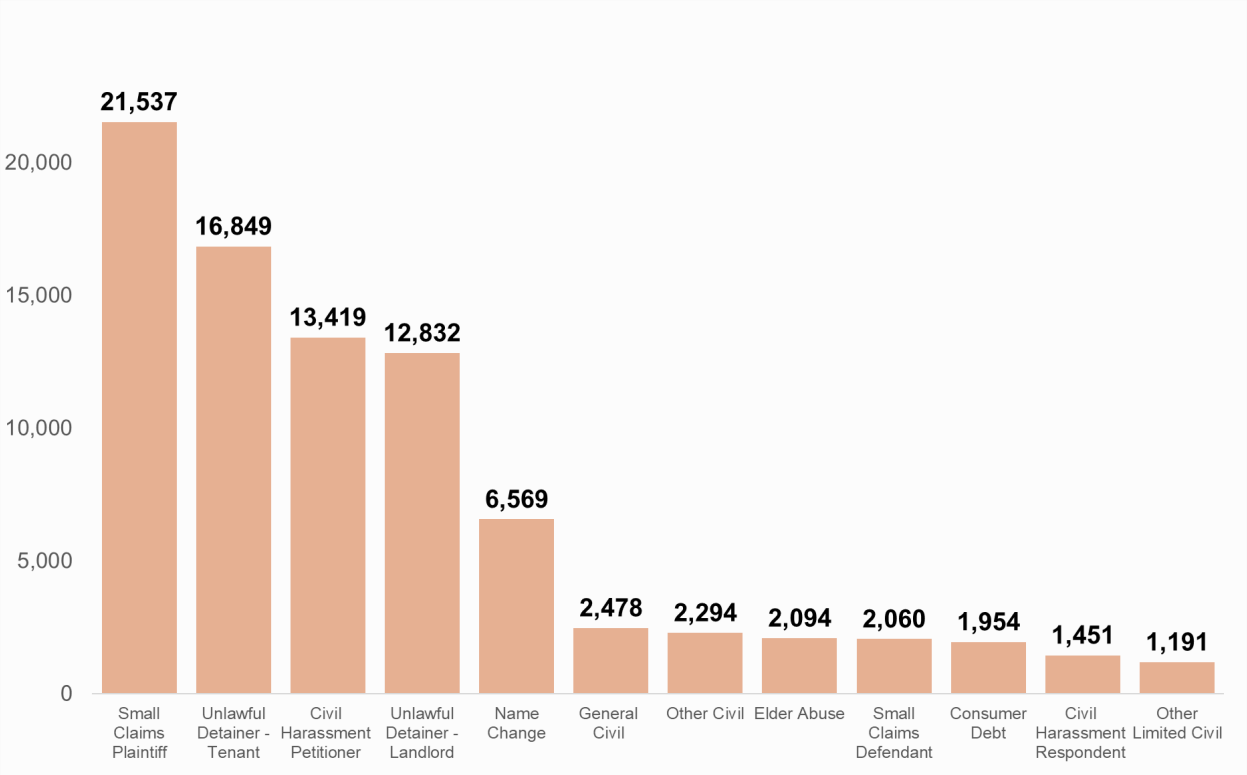
---

[64] These timelines have been altered by the Tenant, Homeowner, and Small Landlord Relief and Stabilization Act of 2020 (Assem. Bill 3088; Stats. 2020, ch. 37), https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB3088, and *Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions To Prevent the Further Spread of COVID–19*, 85 Fed. Reg. 55292 (Sept. 4, 2020), www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-09-04/pdf/2020-19654.pdf.

[65] Appendix B, Table 8.

While landlords may not face such a tight timeline, they must complete multiple steps prior to filing their actions, including learning the basics about a case, serving the proper notices to the tenant asking them to pay and/or leave the property, before then filing and serving the case. It is especially important for landlords to provide this information in order to comply with AB 3088 and other COVID-19–related protections.

Figure 13. Number of Times Civil Law Topics Were Addressed in 2019



Source: STARS Customer Information Database. See Appendix B, Table 13. Civil law topics were addressed a total of 84,728 times during 81,399 visits.

Self-help centers answered litigants' questions regarding a wide variety of civil cases including gender change, personal injury cases, real estate transactions, and bankruptcy.

Civil harassment cases, similar to domestic violence matters, involve a concern for personal safety, but in the case of civil harassment order requests, the case is between persons who do not have a familial or dating relationship (e.g., neighbors, or people in employment or school situations). The percentage of one-on-one assistance needed in these case types is high. These cases require written declarations and are often highly emotional. Elder abuse matters, not unlike

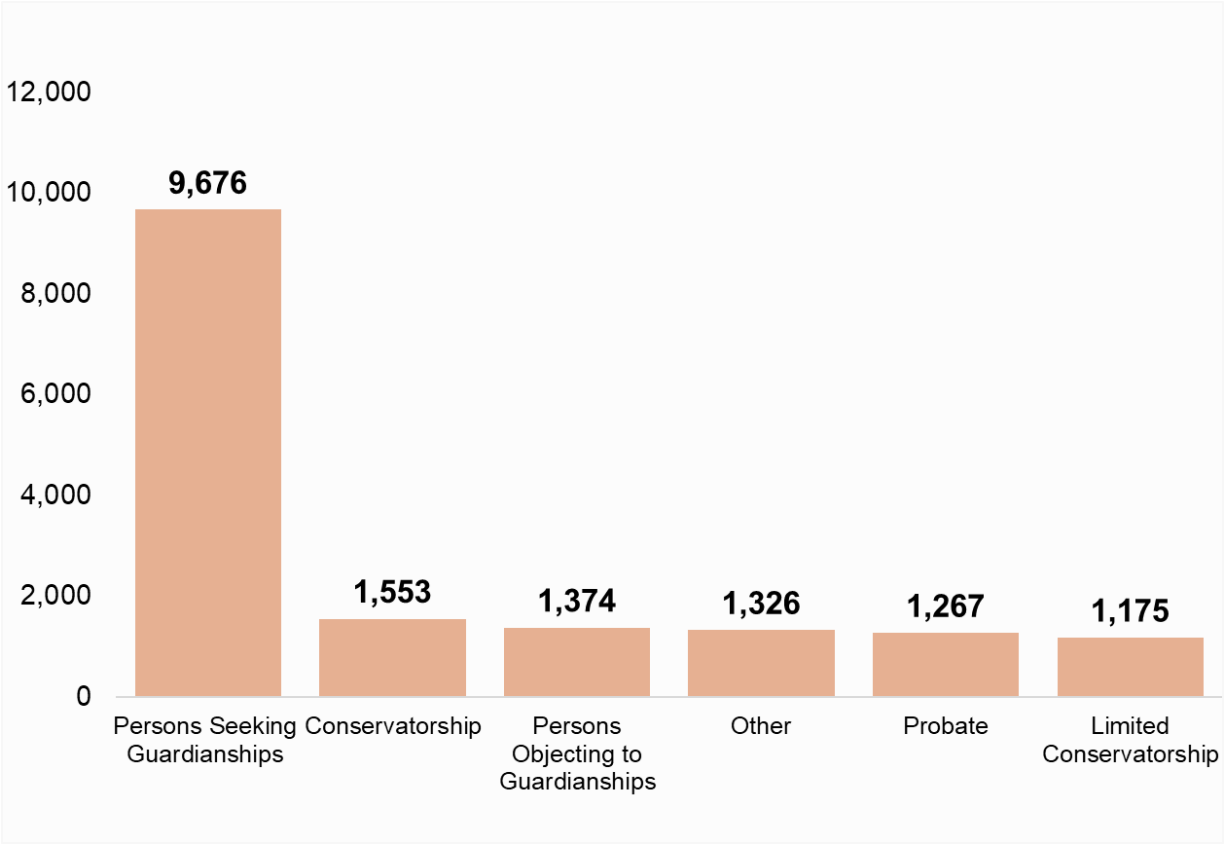
> *"I am extremely happy with all the help and guidance provided regarding my guardianship case. I appreciate the help and knowledge of all the staff."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

civil harassment cases, involve concern for an elder's health and safety. These situations, too, are generally assisted individually because of the sensitivity involved in addressing these matters. For that reason, there are no court workshops on these topics.

Probate

Self-help centers addressed topics in probate cases 16,371 times during 15,857 visits to the center (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Number of Times Probate Topics Were Addressed in 2019



Source: STARS Customer Information Database. See Appendix B, Table 14. Probate topics were addressed a total of 16,371 times during 15,857 visits.

In guardianship cases, someone other than the child's parents is seeking an order from the court to care for the child. This may be due to the death of the parents, but is more commonly a result of parent imprisonment, mental health challenges, or substance abuse. The child's parents or other interested persons may object to the guardianship.

People objecting to the guardianship are nearly always served in a one-on-one setting. There are no Judicial Council forms for objections and, since the matters will be contested, objectors need

more information about the process. Self-help centers also assist parents who want visitation with the child who is being cared for by a guardian.

Additional Case Types

Self-help centers provided in-person, one-on-one assistance in matters that were not related to family law, child support, civil, or probate cases during 2,193 visits in calendar year 2019. Self-help centers assisted with expungements of criminal records 883 times and with traffic issues 334 times. Services were provided over 1,000 times in a variety of cases—from answering questions about criminal issues to public benefits and menacing dogs.[66]

Topics Most Likely to Receive In-Person, One-on-One Assistance

Data was analyzed to identify which topics were most likely to be addressed through one-on-one, in-person assistance at the self-help center, rather than through a workshop or by phone or other remote assistance. The five leading topics that are most likely to be addressed through in-person assistance are listed in Figure 15.

Figure 15. In-Person Services as a Percentage of All Extended Services Provided, by Topic

Topic	One-on-One, In-Person	Total (In-person, Workshop, and Remote)	One-on-One, In-Person as a % of Total
Civil Harassment	14,694	15,161	97
Domestic Violence	35,226	36,844	96
Name Change	6,569	6,976	94
Elder Abuse Restraining Order	2,094	2,238	94
Unlawful Detainer	28,859	31,168	93

Source: Appendix B, Table 8.

Three of the five leading issues resulting in the highest proportion of in-person visits involve restraining orders.

Service Modalities: From One-on-One Meetings to Hybrid Clinics

Self-help centers continue to explore a wide variety of service modalities. Generally, when the court self-help center is helping a small number of visitors daily, the one-on-one method works best. That is because there may be too few visitors to justify developing or holding a workshop.

[66] Appendix B, Table 15.

And, when there are short wait times, there is no pressure to eliminate direct support or otherwise change the services. One-on-one self-help services are, in fact, the norm in very small courts.

One-on-one self-help support is also important in case types where workshops would not be appropriate. For example, in cases involving domestic violence and harassment, where there is the need to provide rapid services, address survivor trauma, and assist litigants in preparing detailed personal declarations in addition to standard forms, workshops would not be suitable.

As described in greater detail in Chapter 11, rural counties tend to offer one-on-one self-help exclusively unless they are part of the 22-court collaborative SHARP (Self-Help Assistance and Referral Program) Tech Connect project.[67] Rural court self-help centers tend to have too few visitors—and fewer yet with the same issues at the same time—to warrant developing and holding a workshop. Small courts also prefer providing one-on-one self-help services to avoid disclosing information to other people in their small communities who may have a connection to the opposing side, or for whom public knowledge of the information would be more of an embarrassment than in a large metropolitan area.

Clinics

The majority of self-help centers have adopted a hybrid clinic model when they do not have enough participants to justify a workshop on a single topic. In the hybrid clinic model, staff determine the status of the case and what court forms litigants need to complete. Staff then provide litigants with basic legal information about their issues and guidance to help them complete the forms. Litigants are then able to work at a computer or with a small group of other litigants who are also working on forms. The staff person moves from litigant to litigant individually answering questions so that they can complete as much of the forms themselves as possible. This method helps litigants understand why they are being asked for the information requested on the form but places them in control of completing their documents. After the forms have been filled out, the forms are reviewed by staff, which means another litigant waiting for services can be brought in to begin work on their forms.

Self-help center flexibility is a hallmark of responsiveness and customer service. For example, if a number of customers come in to the center at the same time with similar issues, a staff attorney may bring them together and conduct an impromptu workshop, where general information is provided to everyone at the same time, after which customers can start working on their court forms individually, and the staff can circulate among them and answer individual questions. Due to their impromptu nature, these are not considered workshops.

This approach works best in jurisdictions where many people seek self-help services at the same time but space and personnel are limited. This approach is generally more effective than simply handing litigants an information packet with blank forms; an impromptu session allows individuals to complete, at least in part, the tasks that they came to court to accomplish when

[67] See Chapter 5 on workshops for a fuller description.

one-on-one help is simply not practical. Litigants still can ask questions as they proceed through the process and are then less likely to get stuck on a question. Self-help center staff also report that there is often a camaraderie among those who are handling their own court cases. This atmosphere of collaboration can help minimize frustration, which in turn may reduce the need to return to the center for additional assistance. Also, unlike filling out forms at home without assistance, the small group dynamic still allows the forms to be reviewed by staff and, when ready, to be copied and prepared for filing that day, so that papers are complete and in order at the filing window.

One-on-One Services

Benefits

Providing services to litigants one-on-one allows self-help center staff to provide more individualized assistance. Personalized assistance often identifies procedural problems that may not surface in a workshop setting, since one-on-one, staff can spot issues that customers would not know to raise. Additionally, it is easier to search records to identify other cases that the customer is involved with that may impact what legal documents to file. And, it is particularly helpful in situations that do not involve standardized forms or where litigants need to write detailed declarations about difficult topics such as domestic violence. It is also the most practical way to address less common case types and legal issues, and it is an ideal way to help litigants who face cognitive and other challenges that make workshops ineffective.

"[She] was beyond helpful. I have received all the information I needed and more. Best service I have ever received from the courthouse."

"She treated me with respect, which made me comfortable to tell her the truth of the case. She not only helped me with the documents, she gave me a peace of mind by explaining what I need to do next."

–Customer Satisfaction Survey

People who seek assistance through the self-help center are often experiencing trauma due to recent or ongoing events. This trauma can affect their ability to understand and retain information. Also, identifying when a customer is losing track of information or needs a break is much easier to do in a one-on-one setting than in a workshop.

One-on-one services offer an opportunity for litigants to share more of their stories and allow staff to provide answers to their specific questions. By allowing people to talk about their individual situations, staff can provide greater support and can do a more detailed job of managing expectations about what is possible to achieve from a court case. This direct service is likely to prevent lawsuits from being filed that are meritless or would not actually meet the needs identified by the litigant. The simple reality of a knowledgeable person at the court being kind and listening respectfully can be enormously helpful, for example, for a litigant who learns from their one-on-one session that the court cannot stop their divorce, or make the other parent visit with their children.

Challenges

The biggest challenge cited by self-help center staff to providing one-on-one services is that such services require a great deal of staff time. Most courts report that they do not have sufficient levels of staffing to meet the demand. If self-help center staff provided only one-on-one services, they would be unable to serve everyone seeking assistance.

Another challenge with providing one-on-one services is that pivoting from one legal topic to another can be difficult. For example, a morning may include meeting with a person with questions about moving out of state with their children, helping a tenant who must file papers immediately to avoid eviction, assisting a person with a neighbor dispute, and then answering a complicated question about serving court papers outside the United States. In a workshop the presenter can group the legal issues together and be prepared for most questions that arise.

For self-help center attorneys providing supervision, one-on-one assistance may pose challenges in ensuring that all members of the self-help team are providing complete, consistent, and neutral information since they are responding directly to the customer's issues, not working off a script or presenting prepared materials.

Self-help center attorneys must also be vigilant to prevent the self-help customer from mistakenly assuming that in one-on-one services an attorney-client relationship has been established, in which a litigant is provided legal advice rather than practical legal and procedural information. There can also be challenges finding adequate space for enough one-on-one assistance. Some customers, responding to questions about their satisfaction with self-help services, expressed concern about the lack of space, especially as it affected the privacy of their interactions with self-help center staff.[68]

[68] See Chapter 2 on customer satisfaction with self-help services.

CHAPTER 5: Workshops

"Class was very informational and easy to understand."[69]

Court cases often require multiple steps. It is difficult for self-help center staff to present all the information a self-represented litigant needs in a one-on-one session while also allowing time for others who need assistance. Given limited resources, it is also inefficient for self-help staff to repeat some of the same basic information multiple times in a day. In an attempt to address these challenges, courts of all sizes provide workshops in person or online containing comprehensive information about the law and procedures for that workshop's case type. Workshops can be live (in person or online webinars) or recorded for viewing at the litigant's convenience.

> *"I came in here not knowing anything and now I am knowledgeable on how to file the divorce."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Comment, Workshop Participant*

Workshops provide education on the legal issues and procedures that are specific to the workshop topics. In these workshops, in addition to information about the procedures, staff members typically walk participants through the court forms needed to take the next steps in their cases. Self-help staff also review completed forms and attachments, and they respond to individual questions wherever possible. Through this process, participants find themselves in groups with people who share their same concerns. In these workshops, participants learn why specific information is requested by the court, what next steps are needed, and which options are available to them.

Over the course of many years providing assistance, courts with significant numbers of people seeking self-help services have determined that workshops are particularly effective for divorce and other family law topics. In many cases, participants attend a three-hour workshop and leave with a completed set of papers, essential information, and—where necessary—an appointment for a workshop for the next step in the process.

At the beginning of the self-help funding expansion, 32 courts began offering or expanding workshop offerings to efficiently serve many more self-represented litigants. The funding allowed courts to obtain appropriate space and hire qualified staff to support their workshop programming. In June 2019, when asked to report detailed statistics on one month of workshops, self-help centers in 34 courts in California reported offering over 1,100 in-person workshops covering 17 different legal topics. Some workshops provide an orientation to a topic, but most include both an explanation of the law and procedures people need to know, as well as hands-on support completing forms and preparing those forms to be filed.[70]

[69] Customer Satisfaction Survey.

[70] Appendix B, Tables 17 and 18.

While one-on-one assistance is still the primary method of help provided in the courts, in 2019 six percent of in-person assistance was provided by workshops.[71]

While economies of scale make it unrealistic for many smaller courts to develop and offer their own workshops, the SHARP Tech Connect consortium of 22 courts joined together to invest in technology that allows one court to schedule live, online workshops that litigants in other courts can attend. Other courts are piloting a series of online workshops that the public can attend remotely, from the convenience of home. Courts are finding that as the public's access to, use of, and comfort with videoconference technologies grows, opportunities to expand these online workshops will increase.[72]

Workshop Structure

Workshop presenters normally use a slide presentation and a script or other form of talking points to provide consistent and complete information from workshop to workshop. In the workshop programs that also provide document preparation support, some courts use document assembly programs that prepopulate sections of the forms (such as the party's name, address, phone number, name of children, date of marriage, etc.).[73] This results in most of the form being typed, and permits participants to complete the remainder of their forms by hand or by adding to the online version as they learn the technical meaning of concepts such as "date of separation" and "community property." Workshop participants can ask questions of the self-help staff and have their forms reviewed before filing. One advantage to in-person workshops is that participants also hear questions posed by other participants and the answers volunteered by others in the group and from the staff.

"Very thorough. Kept things lively and interesting. Covered all topics, answered the group's questions. Gave very specific examples pertaining to what she was covering at the time"

"I greatly appreciate the patience, kindness, knowledge, step-by-step detailed information, professionalism, and so much more in the time [she] spent with me today. I also appreciate the attorney that reviewed my paperwork."

–Customer Satisfaction Comments, Workshop Participants

While most workshops involve assistance with the completion of legal forms, some workshops are for information only. For example, a workshop on preparing for court may include videos that introduce viewers to what a day in court will look like. This includes what to expect from clerks, judges, and other staff; court etiquette such as how to speak to the judge and how to dress; how to prepare a presentation; and how to handle unexpected situations. In these workshops, participants have probably already prepared their paperwork and received a hearing date.

[71] Appendix B, Table 1.

[72] Appendix B, Table 16.

[73] See Chapter 9 on document assembly for further description.

Practical tips for preparation help lower a self-represented litigant's anxiety and enables them to have a more successful day in court.

> *"It was explained properly to people w/out legal knowledge, like myself."*
>
> *"I liked how she made sure everyone was on the same level in understanding what was applicable to us."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey, Workshop Participants*

Workshops are best suited for issues that arise frequently in medium and larger courts with enough people with similar issues at the same time. Offering workshops in these contexts is an effective tool for providing information to a group of people at once. Some issues require more individual discussion and assessment, such as the request of a person under 18 to emancipate. Other legal issues may not be very common, and if the topic is rare enough that a workshop would be scheduled only infrequently, people are less likely to return for the workshop. Additionally, these case types may be more complex and require longer case-specific preparation time than what can be covered in a workshop.

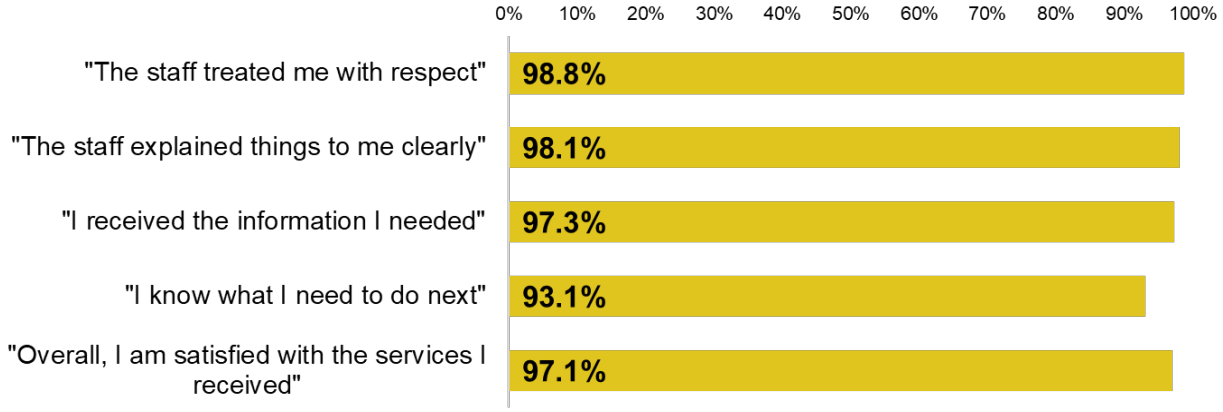
Alternatively, the case type might be very suitable for a workshop, but the litigant may not be, due to physical limitations, mental health struggles, or literacy issues that cannot be effectively addressed in the group setting of a workshop. In such cases, the staff time and resources needed to assist such a participant would be better spent in a one-on-one setting even for a common case type. Likewise, the potential frustrations for other workshop participants who would not be able to get their needs met would distract from the benefits of a workshop.

In the Customer Satisfaction Survey conducted in October 2019, nearly all survey respondents who participated in workshops agreed, or strongly agreed, that staff treated them with respect and explained things clearly. They also agreed that they had received the information they needed, and they knew what they needed to do next.[74]

> *"The staff gave me very detailed explanation regarding things that I did not understand and made everything clear. Thanks a lot."*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey, Workshop Participant*

[74] Appendix B, Table 45.

Figure 16. Customer Satisfaction Survey: Responses from Workshop Attendees

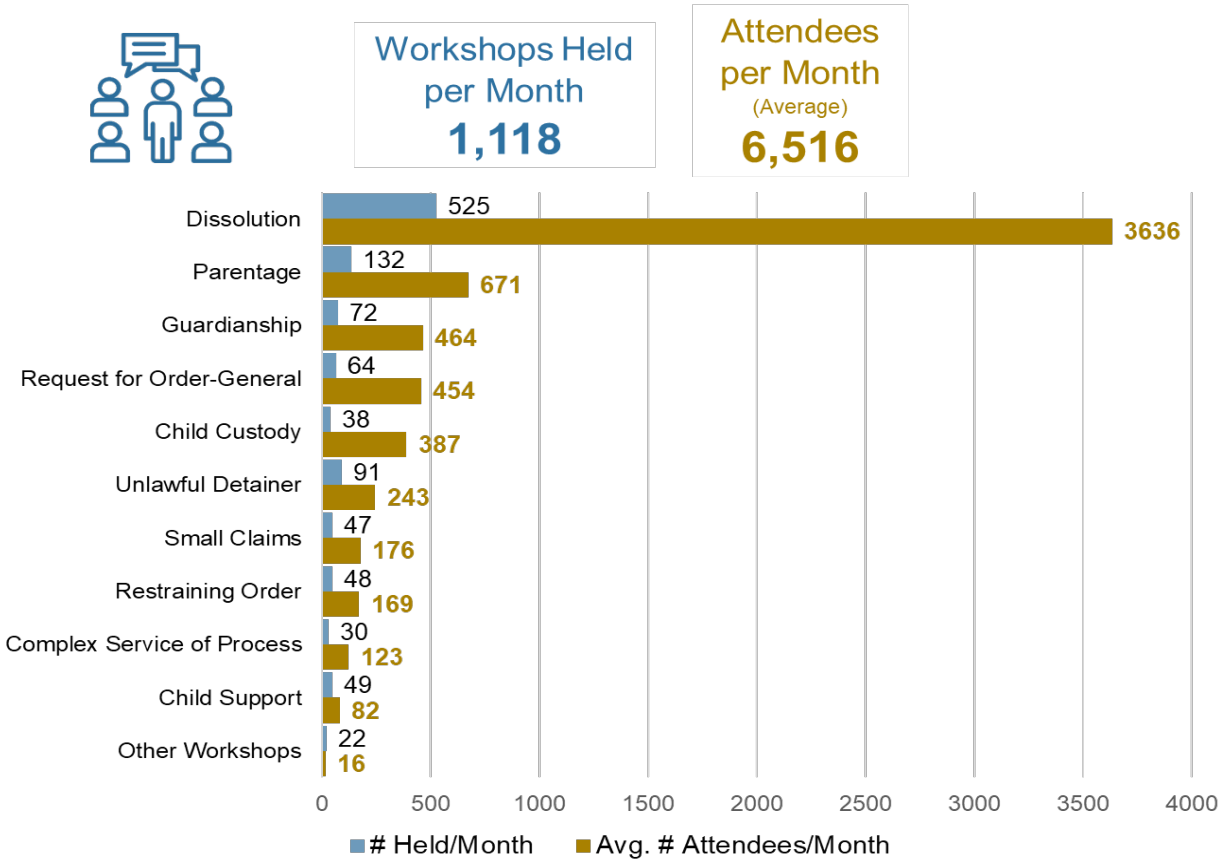


Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey, October 2019. See Appendix B, Table 48. N=489 workshop attendees.

A statewide monthly total of 1,118 workshops was reported by courts in June 2019. Among these workshops, courts reported that 233 are repeated every month. As discussed in Chapter 7, a number of workshops are also offered in Spanish (61), Vietnamese (4), Armenian (2), and Russian (1).[75]

[75] Appendix B, Tables 17, 18, and 19.

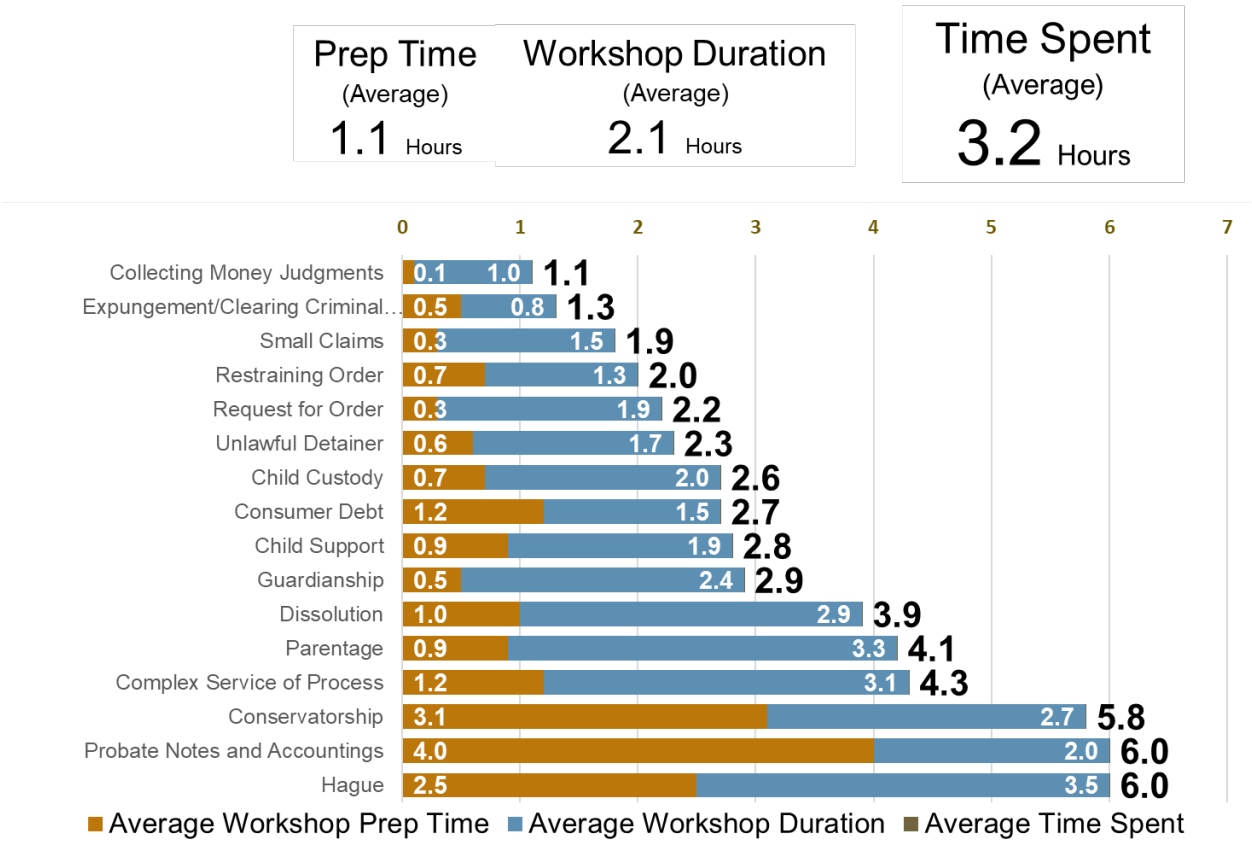
Figure 17. Number of Workshops and Average Time Required



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports FY 2017–18 through FY 2019–20. See Appendix B, Table 18.

Despite the many advantages of conducting workshops, workshop development is a laborious process and can be more time-consuming than providing one-on-one assistance in which specific questions can be researched and colleagues can be contacted for more complex problems. Thus, court personnel need to determine if there is sufficient demand as well as capacity to develop the presentation and materials for a specific workshop. Figure 18 shows the average duration and preparation time by workshop topic. Statewide all workshops averaged 1.1 hours in preparation time and 2.1 hours in duration. This preparation time does not include the initial time spent developing the workshop content; it represents the preparation time to deliver a workshop and review participant case information.

Figure 18. Average Duration and Preparation Time by Workshop Topic



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly report, June 2019. See Appendix B, Table 19.

Remote Workshops: Videoconferences and Webinars

Building on the Judicial Council's Court Innovations Grant Program projects funded by the Budget Act of 2016, by June 2019, 22 courts joined the Superior Court of Butte County's SHARP Tech Connect initiative that uses videoconferencing technology to connect courts and provide online workshop content to people within that consortium.[76] This facilitates the presentation of a live, in-person workshop at one location that is broadcast to litigants at many other participating locations, providing workshop functionality to a much larger number of self-help centers.

> *"It was so much better than having to deal with parking and security and long lines. I was relaxed in my own environment. I had all the materials at hand. I still had human interaction, but I didn't have to wait in line or drive anywhere."*
>
> *–Ventura Webinar Participant*

[76] For more information about SHARP Tech Connect and a list of all participating courts, see https://sharpcourts.org/about-sharp/sharptechconnect/.

Another model, developed by the Superior Court of Ventura County, allows the court to conduct live, interactive video workshops that participants can watch at home, or at other locations, avoiding the need for litigants to come to the court. Ventura's self-help workshops are offered in both English and Spanish with groups of up to 25 self-represented litigants. The workshops include the following topics:

- Divorce/legal separation and requests for orders in family law;
- Civil harassment restraining orders;
- Probate guardianships; and
- Landlord-tenant cases.

Participants are prescreened by completing a brief, online questionnaire that the workshop presenter will review, along with a review of the participants' existing cases, to make sure that the workshop is a good fit. Participants are then scheduled for the workshops, which provide foundational information and assistance about law, procedure, and form completion. The participants not only see but can access their forms and other documents on the screen as the forms are discussed in the workshop. This process gives them the option to complete and print the documents in the workshop or wait until later. It also allows participants to ask questions in real time. The presenter can often provide specific answers, having previously reviewed the participant's case file. As needed, individual consultations and follow-up meetings are scheduled for individual videoconferences via chat through a dedicated email address, or in person at the court's self-help center.

In fiscal year 2018–19, the Superior Court of Ventura County offered 175 self-help webinars. Of those, 28 were civil (16 percent) and 147 were family law (84 percent). The webinars assisted 482 self-represented litigants, 103 of whom resided in a county other than Ventura.[77]

> *"Thank you for providing a service like this. Using Zoom slideshow to go along with the speaker's dialogue made it easy to comprehend. I'm definitely feeling more informed and confident with moving forward."*
>
> *–Ventura Webinar Participant*

In surveys conducted with webinar participants, 83 percent reported feeling more prepared with filing their court forms, and 91 percent felt more prepared for their court hearing because they participated in a webinar.[78]

While 47 percent of participants preferred an online option, 6 percent preferred in-person assistance, and 47 percent preferred a combination of in-person and workshop assistance.[79]

[77] Superior Court of Ventura County, *Legal Self-Help Webinars Fiscal Year Snapshot: 2018–19 Fiscal Year Statistical Data*, www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/ea-Ventura-FY-18-19-Snapshot.pptx.

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] *Ibid.*

Other courts have been developing online workshops that litigants can view according to their own schedules. While these would not be live webinars, prerecorded programs like the orientation to the process of divorce developed by the Superior Court of Los Angeles County will provide participants with a thorough overview of the divorce process and enable litigants to complete a workbook to prepare the required forms.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

Serving more customers. Workshops provide self-help users access to useful information in a helpful group setting. Workshops allow courts to serve more people during time that otherwise might only serve three or four people in one-on-one meetings. Workshops enable courts to better organize their time by serving more people effectively and freeing up personnel for litigants whose cases and circumstances are not appropriate for workshops.

> *"The public does not have to come to the center and wait all day. With a workshop, they have a set time to show up and they know ahead of time how long they will be at the courthouse."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Attorney*

Process overviews provided. A workshop presents the full overview of the process and the issues common to a specific legal topic (e.g., divorce, eviction, guardianships). A small claims workshop will describe the process and can help parties evaluate the pros and cons of filing a lawsuit by helping them consider the challenges of collecting a judgment, and by introducing them to opportunities to resolve their matters using alternative dispute resolution.

Support in completing paperwork or document preparation. Workshop participants normally complete their court paperwork as part of the workshop process. A benefit to the in-person workshop setting is that participants often help one another, in addition to having their forms and documents reviewed by self-help center staff. By the time participants leave the workshop, they are very often prepared to file their paperwork with the clerk's office. This support and guidance ensure that the documents have been properly prepared and creates efficiencies for both court clerks and judges.

Learning from others. Litigants also benefit from hearing the answers to other workshop participants' questions. For example, if not for the questions from others in the workshop, a participant might not have thought to ask about health insurance costs or might have realized that they may want to prepare a new will after their divorce. In a workshop setting, litigants are made to feel safe, and to feel as if they are not alone in the complex and often intimidating legal processes they are involved with.

> *"Many times, customers learn that certain information is relevant to their situation which they did not previously consider and may not have divulged through on-one-one assistance."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Attorney*

Maximizing staff skills. Eleven of the 34 courts that provide workshops report they can utilize volunteers and non-attorney staff to run them. These workshop leaders are trained to use slide decks and other quality software and materials for the presentations, allowing staff attorneys and more specialized experts to work with people in one-on-one settings and to address the more difficult issues that might be specific to a customer's case and not appropriate for discussion in a group setting. A volunteer or other non-attorney staff person can be trained to become an aide to provide assistance filling out paperwork or to help the customer understand general requirements. Often, workshop leaders help litigants who are uncomfortable asking questions directly by asking questions on the litigants' behalf to the expert presenter or self-help attorney.

Efficiency for self-represented litigants. Regularly scheduled times and dates for workshops allow participants to better schedule their time and know how long they are likely to be at the self-help center, compared to individuals who drop in and/or come for a one-on-one appointment. Several courts provide online and phone sign-up for workshops so that customers do not have to come to court in person and then return on another date.[80]

Challenges

In the survey on workshops reported in June 2019, the following issues were identified by self-help centers as issues to consider in implementing workshops.

No-shows. Fifteen courts (44 percent) said they experience the problem of people signing up for the workshop but not attending. Some courts are addressing the problems of no-shows through text reminders (see Chapter 8).

Not enough volume. Fifteen courts (44 percent) also reported that not having enough self-represented litigants with the same case type prevented them from having workshops on that topic (see the section on Remote Workshops above for solutions to this challenge that courts are pursuing).

Adequate number of participants. Thirty-five percent of courts reported that a key challenge was having a sufficient number of participants who can attend at a prescribed time in order to make the workshop useful and efficient. Most people who come for assistance want help that day; except in the largest courts, it is difficult to provide workshops every day.

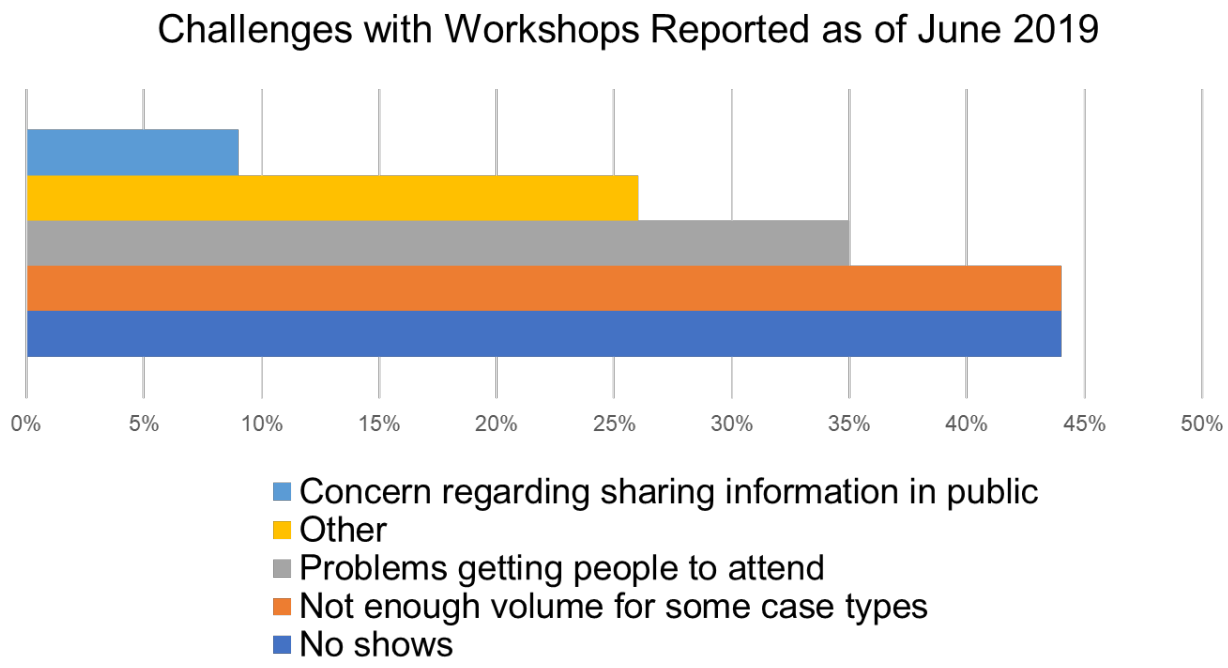
> *"Customers want to be served when they come to our walk-in clinic and it takes a lot of effort to redirect them to our workshops which are only offered certain days and times."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Attorney*

Inadequate space and staffing. Some of the medium to large courts identified lack of space and staff as an issue. According to staff at one self-help center, "The more popular workshops, such as the divorce workshop, need more staff and a larger space."

[80] See, e.g., San Diego, www.sdcourt.ca.gov/portal/page?_pageid=55,1524197&_dad=portal (Family Law Facilitator's Office Online Workshop Reservation System), and Sacramento, www.saccourt.ca.gov/family/workshops.aspx.

Time required for planning, designing, practice, and outreach. It is critical to give a lot of thought and consideration as to what content, activities, and support can and should be covered in a workshop. Staff have to develop screening questions to identify whose situation is—and is not—appropriate for the workshop. A curriculum has to be developed and regularly updated. This curriculum generally includes a PowerPoint presentation, scripts for staff, and handouts. Staff need time to practice and refine the workshops. Because there can be a lot of new and technical information for participants, it is particularly important to hone a clear and engaging presentation. In order to ensure sufficient attendance, courts need to publicize the workshop. This may involve developing flyers and maintaining information for the court website.

Figure 19. Workshop Challenges



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports, June 2019. See Appendix B, Table 20.

CHAPTER 6: Civil Expansion

"The idealized picture of an adversarial system in which both parties are represented by competent attorneys who can assert all legitimate claims and defenses is an illusion."[81]

Expanding the access of self-represented litigants who needed more services for civil case types at self-help centers was a major priority of the self-help expansion. With the recommendations of the Chief Justice's Commission on the Future of California's Court System (Futures Commission) in 2017,[82] court self-help centers began expanding their available services, materials, and support beyond the strong historic base in family law, guardianship, and restraining orders. The emerging and increasingly important civil law topics include landlord-tenant matters, consumer debt, and small claims.

With the self-help expansion, all 58 of California's trial courts now assist with some civil case types. And, in addition to providing general information in these case types, 31 court self-help centers also reported the expansion of substantial services to help litigants to accomplish essential tasks related to those cases, such as assistance with preliminary research, trial preparation, basic discovery, and completion of pleadings.

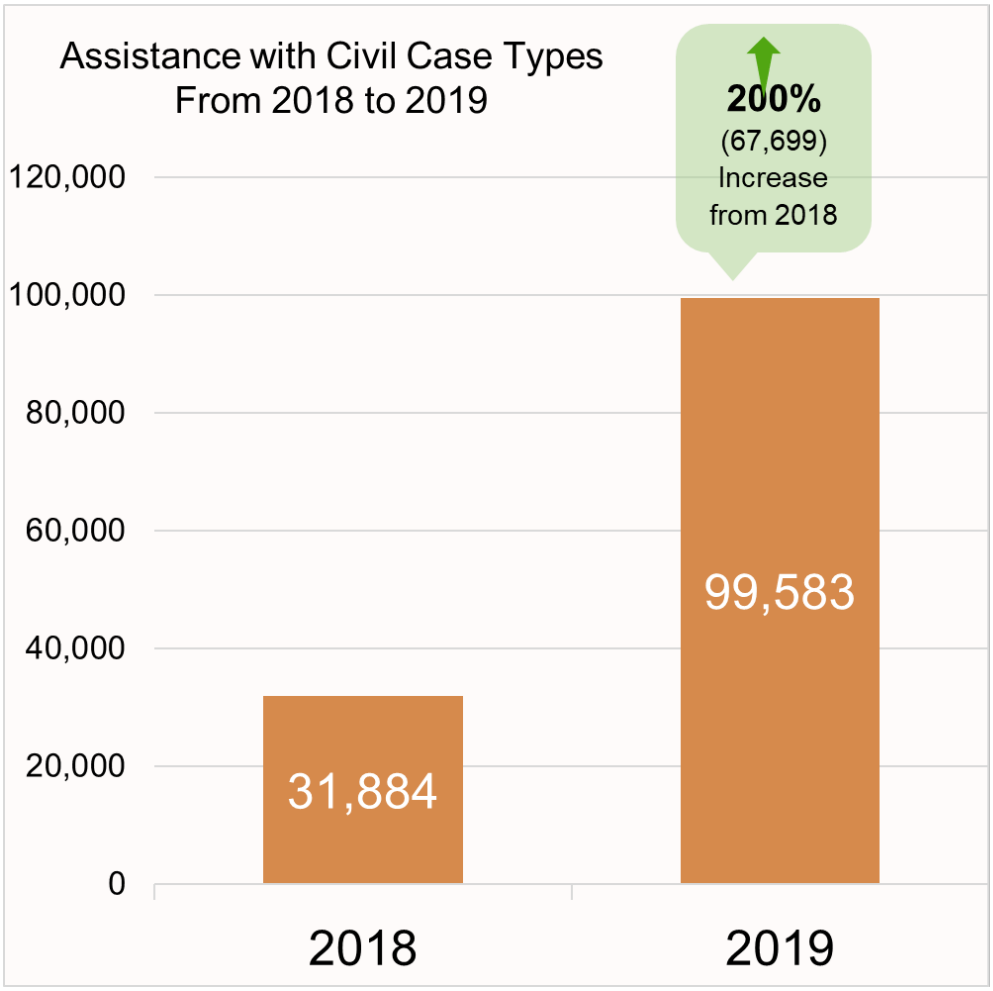
During 2019, the first full calendar year of increased funding, assistance with civil case types increased over 212 percent compared to 2018, from 31,884 to 99,583.[83]

[81] Commission on the Future of California's Court System, *Report to the Chief Justice* (2017), p. 29 (citing *The Landscape of Civil Justice in State Courts*).

[82] *Id.* at p. 17.

[83] Appendix B, Table 10. The 99,583 total includes workshop and remote services and exceeds the 81,399 civil customer one-on-one, in-person encounters discussed in Chapter 4.

Figure 20. Assistance with Civil Case Types, from 2018 to 2019



Source: Appendix B, Table 10. Includes all services related to civil case types, including remote and workshop services.

The Need for Assistance in Civil Cases Is Growing

The traditional vision of civil law has been one in which both parties are fully represented. However, in 2015, the National Center for State Courts released a report that found that 76 percent of civil cases now involve at least one self-represented litigant:

> Nearly two-thirds (64%) [of all civil cases] were contract cases, and more than half of those were debt collection (37%) and landlord/tenant cases (29%). An additional sixteen percent (16%) were small claims cases involving disputes valued at $12,000 or less.[84]

[84] National Center for State Courts, *The Landscape of Civil Litigation in State Courts* (2015), p. iii, www.ncsc.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/13376/civiljusticereport-2015.pdf.

Additionally, the report found 9 percent were characterized as "other civil" cases involving agency appeals and domestic or criminal-related cases. Only 7 percent were tort cases and 1 percent were real property cases.[85]

To address this radically changed civil court environment, the final report of the Futures Commission included recommendations to the Chief Justice to provide additional education and support for self-represented litigants in their civil cases. In response to these recommendations, and at the direction of the Chief Justice, the Judicial Council has been developing extensive education for litigants in civil cases. That effort has begun with self-help services related to consumer debt issues—a key civil case type with many self-represented litigants. Flowcharts explaining the process, information on how to respond to cases, and how to resolve them are all being added to the California Courts Online Self-Help Center, along with tools to help people fill out the required forms more easily.

Expanded Civil Case Services

Thirty-one court-based self-help centers expanded the services they offer in civil cases. This expansion has allowed for more comprehensive self-help services throughout the state. Some of the civil case types are easier for self-represented litigants to accomplish with the assistance of self-help centers and those are now commonly provided throughout the state. Others require much more assistance, and many centers have determined that they cannot responsibly provide assistance without additional funding for staff attorneys with experience in civil litigation.

- **Name change**. Fifty-six courts now assist with name changes, a process that has become increasingly important with the use of REAL ID and increased awareness and acceptance of gender identity issues, which often result in the desire by individuals to change their names to match their gender identity. It is also essential for immigrants seeking citizenship to ensure consistent names. Name changes are seldom contested and the forms and procedures are relatively straightforward. However, many people still have questions as they navigate the process for themselves.
- **Civil harassment**. Fifty-three courts now assist with civil harassment actions in which protection from abuse is sought from a person who is not a family member or who is in a dating relationship with the person seeking protection. Examples include workplace and neighbor-to-neighbor issues. The forms and procedures are designed to be similar to domestic violence restraining order forms since the users of those forms are unrepresented.
- **Elder abuse**. Forty-two courts now assist with elder abuse cases in which protection from physical, emotional, or financial abuse is sought for a person age 65 or over. These forms are also similar to domestic violence forms.

[85] *Id.* at p. iv.

- **Landlord-tenant**. Fifty-two courts now assist with landlord-tenant cases, primarily eviction matters. To maintain the court's neutrality, the majority of self-help centers provided assistance to both tenants facing eviction and landlords seeking guidance on evicting a tenant.
- **Small claims.** Forty-six courts now assist with small claims matters, which are civil cases involving claims of $10,000 or less. These cases have special simplified civil court procedures and attorneys are not allowed to represent litigants at small claims trials. Under law, each county must make arrangements for a Small Claims Advisor.[86] A growing number of self-help center attorneys now serve as that advisor. Others provide services to supplement those of the county's advisor. Since small claims forms are relatively simple, this assistance usually involves providing education on the law involved in the issue in dispute, as well as procedural information. If the court enters a judgment, self-help centers assist with the process and forms to both try to enforce or defend collection of those judgments.
- **Debt collection and consumer**. Thirty-nine courts now assist with debt collection matters and 28 with other consumer matters, such as when a person purchases a product that turns out to be defective and wants their money back.
- **Complex civil matters**. Forty-five courts now provide some level of focused services in more complex civil matters including foreclosures and breach of contract, as well as the more sophisticated civil procedural components of a case including discovery, trial preparation, case management conference statements, motions to set aside defaults, and trial preparation—all specialized tasks for more complex civil cases. However, as described below, few are able to provide comprehensive services in these areas.

The chart below describes the increase in the numbers of court self-help centers offering assistance with civil case types.

[86] Code Civ. Proc., § 116.940.

Figure 21. Number of Self-Help Centers Offering Assistance with Civil Case Types and Increase from Fiscal Year 2017–18 to Fiscal Year 2019–2020

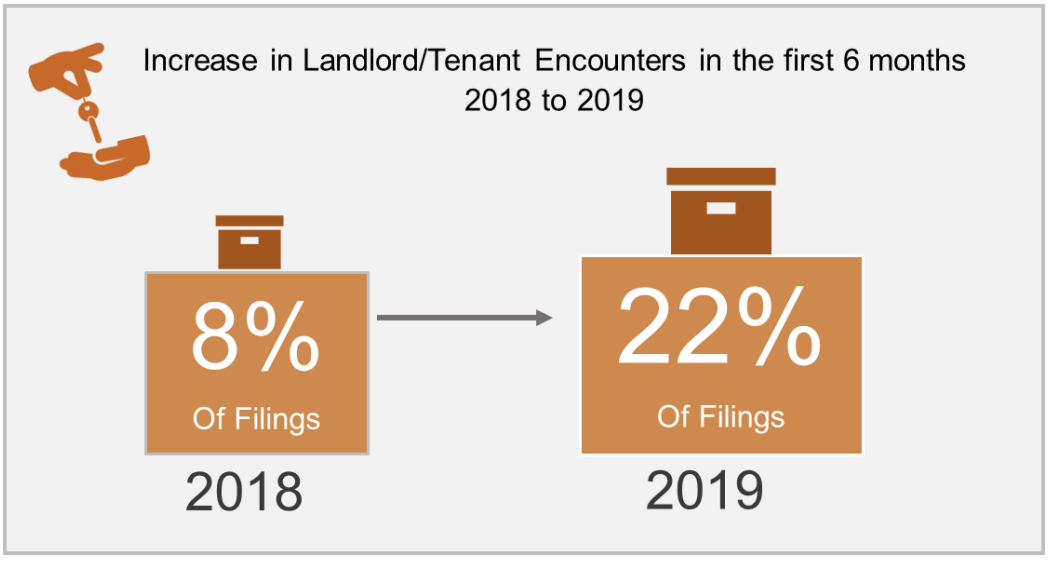
Case Type	No. of Self-Help Centers Offering Service	Increase FY2017–18 to FY2019–20	Percentage Increase
Name Change	56	3	6%
Civil Harassment Prevention	53	2	4%
Landlord-Tenant	52	8	18%
Small Claims	46	2	5%
Elder Abuse	42	1	2%
Debt Collection	39	2	5%
Consumer	28	2	8%
Complex Civil Matters*	45	8	22%

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, FY 2017–18 to FY 2019–20.

* Includes assisting with general civil cases such as foreclosures, breach of contract, discovery, trial preparation, case management conference statements, motions to set aside defaults and trial preparation—specialized tasks for more complex civil cases.

Increased Services in Landlord-Tenant Cases

Figure 22. Increase in Landlord-Tenant Encounters



Source: STARS Customer Information Database, data as of April 3, 2020, and Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS), data as of May 15, 2020.

Fifty-two out of 58 self-help centers now assist with landlord-tenant cases and the number of people served has grown dramatically. In the first six months of 2018, self-help centers assistance in landlord-tenant cases represented 8 percent of landlord-tenant filings; in the first six months of 2019, assistance represented 22 percent of filings.

A tenant came to the self-help center seeking assistance because she had a severely disabled child who needed to have clean medical equipment but there was no water now because of the fire damage to the community. The child was on a feeding tube, and the cleanliness of the medical equipment was imperative. The tenant used the rent money to purchase water delivery from a water truck and the landlord issued an eviction notice.
The self-help center staff helped the tenant to complete the Answer form and to understand the court process. When the landlord refused to follow court orders to supply the water and to consider the payments the tenant made to get water delivered as rent under the "repair and deduct" method of correcting problems of uninhabitability in rental units, the tenant came back to the self-help center. Self-help center staff reached out to a local legal aid clinic who took the case for the tenant. Later, the tenant came by to thank the self-help staff and let them know that there was a resolution that allowed them to move to better housing with safe conditions for the disabled child.
–Self-Help Center Director

Self-help centers help tenants understand the legal process and their rights under the law. They help tenants prepare a legal response to eviction actions within the traditional five-day period after the tenant is served with the summons as required by law. They provide information to help the tenant try to work out an agreement with the landlord or prepare for trial. If the tenant is eligible for legal aid, they refer the tenant for representation.

Landlords seeking to evict a person on their own generally require more assistance because they must provide very careful notice to the tenant before filing legal papers with the court. Often the self-help center is the only place where a low-income landlord (who may be renting out a room in their house to help with the mortgage or rent) can receive assistance with a tenant who is not paying the rent or is abusive. It is critical that landlords understand their responsibilities under the law.

A landlord came to the self-help center seeking assistance because her tenants were not paying rent. She spoke very limited English and had been granted the property as part of a divorce. She had no way to make income, got no spousal support and was suffering with cancer. The rent paid her mortgage and provided her with a meager income. She could not determine the proper notice dates and kept making errors. In the meantime, the tenants were destroying her property. The self-help center helped her to correct her paperwork and helped her calculate a timeline so that the hearing date would not conflict with her cancer treatment. The center staff helped her understand what a trial is and helped her get her paperwork in order and properly filed. When she was finally successful, they helped her prepare her judgment and the writ for the sheriff so that she could find new tenants.
-- Self-Help Center Director

Challenges with Expanding Into Debt Collection and More Complex Civil Matters

Additional funding will be required to expand help in more complicated civil cases. While 39 courts can provide some level of assistance with consumer debt cases, some self-help centers that piloted assistance with expanded services in these areas determined not to proceed, and instead made the difficult decision to focus their resources on other case types. For example, one court found that they could readily assist litigants with completing answers in consumer debt cases. However, they learned that the attorneys for the credit card companies would send a large packet of discovery requests with interrogatories, requests for documents, and requests for admissions. The self-represented litigant would need repeated trips to the self-help center for many more hours of assistance. Due to the complex nature of many civil cases, usually these cases are handled by attorneys who file pleadings. As such, there are no standard forms to respond to these requests; and, if the response is not provided to the creditor in 30 days, the self-represented litigant could lose the case and be liable for the creditor's attorney's fees.

The amount of time required for the additional services beyond helping a defendant file an answer is more than most self-help centers can afford. For example, the Superior Court of Ventura County's self-help center has successfully assisted in a wide variety of civil cases since 1997. Even with years of experience, they have found that general civil processes tend to take longer than most family law matters. They noted the following amounts of time needed to handle the most common issues for which self-represented litigants seek assistance:[87]

Initiating discovery	0.75 hours
Responding to discovery	1.5 hours
Opposition to motion to compel discovery[88]	3.0 hours
Explain trial process in detail	3.0 hours
Draft witness list & exhibit list	1.0 hours
Draft trial brief	3.0 hours
Total	**12.25 hours**

The 12.25 total hours required to assist a self-represented litigant in a civil case that goes to trial represents much more time than most self-help centers can allocate to a single litigant, with the resources courts currently have. Litigants in such cases need multiple appointments at each stage of the process to complete their tasks. While the centers providing civil self-help services refer to lawyer referral services for full representation and assistance, all too often the litigant cannot afford legal services. Most legal aid organizations cannot take many civil legal cases due to their own limited resources.

[87] Communication, Superior Court of Ventura County Self-Help Center.

[88] A motion to compel discovery is commonly filed if a self-represented litigant does not respond within 30 days to discovery requests propounded by attorneys. Litigants must file papers in opposition to the motion and explain why they shouldn't pay the other side's attorney's fees as well as completing the discovery requested.

A workable model for self-help centers to serve self-represented litigants with complex and in-depth civil issues is still in the earliest stages. Many self-help attorneys and staff will need specialized training, additional staff, and access to sample forms, document assembly tools, informational handouts, and other resources that have enabled them to provide more efficient services in family law. While data on an increase in requests for assistance with consumer debt and eviction matters due to the pandemic is not available as of this writing, there is the potential for a surge in these requests.

Legal and Procedural Differences That Make It More Challenging for People to Represent Themselves in Civil Cases Than in Family Law

It is not simply the case type that makes litigants less likely to be able to represent themselves in court. Often, the nuanced and highly technical procedures are the issues that cause self-represented litigants the greatest harm. Here are the procedures and case elements that frustrate many self-represented litigants.

Judicial Discretion Less Available or Common

Judicial discretion includes the amount of leeway a bench officer has to be "forgiving" of a litigant's failure to follow the letter of the law perfectly. Self-represented litigants who experienced court through family law likely experienced a great deal of judicial discretion. But there is a significant difference in how judicial discretion is utilized in civil law as opposed to family law. Judges deciding family law matters are given greater latitude to use their discretion to achieve an equitable result while judges deciding civil matters are not.[89] The effect of this on any litigant or attorney is that they may find family law court to be more forgiving of harmless errors. This is not the case in most civil litigation.[90] In traditional civil litigation, timelines are tight and rigidly adhered to. Deadlines are cause for defaults. And judges have little capacity to exercise discretion when one side simply did not know the rules. This means that self-help center staff must be trained in all facets of civil law.

Importance of Adherence to Timelines

While there are some timelines in a family law case that cannot be waived by the court without stipulation by both parties, there are many that are waived with some frequency, either formally or informally. For instance, a family law respondent who does not file a Responsive Declaration promptly after being served with a Request for Order will still be allowed to show up to the hearing date and have input at the hearing. In a civil case, by contrast, this would likely not be allowed and could result in the unaware self-represented litigant losing their case.

[89] Jane Murphy, "Eroding the Myth of Discretionary Justice in Family Law: The Child Support Experiment" (1991) 70 *North Carolina Law Review* 212.

[90] Small claims cases are an exception, where bench officers commonly guide the litigants, who tend to be equally unfamiliar with court procedures.

Standard Forms Not as Available

The Judicial Council has developed hundreds of forms to help family law litigants plead their cases properly with no legal drafting. In contrast, there are very few civil forms available. This is, in large measure, due to the wide diversity of legal issues in civil cases. Instead, most civil litigation requires the parties to draft their own pleadings that identify the issues that need to be addressed under the law, and all of the proper legal authorities that support the claim. Document assembly programs have been created to help self-represented litigants fill out forms. However, without standard form sets, there are no statewide document assembly programs to assist a self-represented litigant to prepare a proper pleading.

Complexity of Legal Process

Family law has evolved in California with an understanding that most litigants are not represented. Except for small claims matters, this is not true for civil cases.[91]

Discovery is the process by which each party must share information with the opposing party. This enables the parties to "discover" the details needed to properly litigate their cases, and to know what the issues of the case are likely to be. Civil cases generally require preparing and responding to discovery requests that are very complex. These include interrogatories, where specific written questions are posed. While there are standard forms for some questions to be asked,[92] not all questions are listed in these forms, and there are no forms for responses. Additionally, attorneys often send the opposing party requests for admissions[93] that require the other party to state the truth of certain facts or the genuineness of documents, and that generally cannot be changed or challenged once answered. There is no form for a response, and if the answering party does not respond in 30 days, the facts may be deemed true by default. Attorneys will also commonly send a request for production of documents,[94] which again has no form for response and a timeline that the party must meet. These requests for discovery are relatively easy for an attorney who commonly practices in this case type to prepare and send. It is much more difficult for a self-represented litigant to prepare a relevant and timely response. Also, unlike family law cases, civil cases are more likely to require depositions, which allow for the parties or witnesses to be questioned under oath in advance of a trial. A court reporter is required for the deposition to document what is said, a cost that many litigants cannot afford. All of these elements are challenging to prepare for and respond to. And, while all of these discovery tools are available in family law, they are less frequently used. In civil litigation, however, they are considered common tools of the trade, which means not just self-represented litigants, but self-help center staff need to have some fluency in these areas if the self-help center is to provide assistance in civil case types.

---

[91] Judicial Council of Cal., *Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants* (Feb. 2004).

[92] See *Form Interrogatories* (forms DISC-001 through DISC-005), www.courts.ca.gov/forms.htm?query=disc.

[93] See *Request for Admissions* (form DISC-020), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/disc020.pdf.

[94] Code Civ. Proc., § 2031.280.

One-Sided Attorney Representation

In family law, if one party has sufficient assets to pay for an attorney, that party can be ordered to pay for an attorney for the other party.[95] This is not the case in civil matters, particularly where the stakes are high. In most civil cases there can be an attorney on one side—representing a creditor trying to enforce a judgment, a landlord seeking to evict a tenant, or an employer defending a wrongful termination lawsuit. The imbalance in the finances, knowledge, and skill of the advocate on the one side versus the self-represented litigant is striking and leads to problems that exacerbate the imbalance of the process and result in increased harm being borne by the self-represented litigant.

For instance, if one side is skilled in the discovery process, the discovery requests can frustrate, frighten, and overwhelm the self-represented litigant. The unskilled self-represented litigant is likely to have trouble understanding how to respond properly, especially following necessary timelines. Improper responses to discovery requests can result in discovery sanctions including orders to pay the attorney's fees. The inexperienced litigant may also require significant time for the court in having to consider motions to compel the answers to those discovery requests and motions for sanctions.

In this case, self-help centers assist self-represented litigants to understand the discovery request and provide them with templates or guides on how to respond. Center staff assist the litigant to understand the questions and help them identify what documents are required. They also help the litigant understand the importance of meeting deadlines. Finally, center staff identify when legal aid might be able to provide assistance.

Looking Forward

Self-help centers have expanded the services they offer, the number of staff members available, and the comprehensiveness of their efforts thanks to the increased funding received. That said, while self-help centers can assist with many case types, statewide expansion into more general civil law likely will require additional funding, increased education for self-help center staff, and the development of additional print, workshop, and online educational resources for self-represented litigants. With additional funding, courts will be better able to hire attorneys with general civil law backgrounds; and also with additional resources, the Judicial Council will be able to devote time and energy to developing additional instructional guides, sample forms, and templates for responses to requests for discovery and other critical resources.

Self-help assistance in family law has matured significantly in the last 23 years, both because of increased resources in self-help centers, and from efforts to simplify forms and procedures. Given the current and likely expansion of the need to address landlord-tenant and consumer issues because of the COVID-19 pandemic, consideration should be given to strategies that will improve the delivery of services in these critical case types that involve so many self-represented litigants. Planning efforts with self-help center attorneys with experience in these case types,

[95] Fam. Code, §§ 2030, 3121, 3557, 7605.

along with legal aid and the bar, could be very helpful to identify methods to streamline services and improve resources pending increased funding.

CHAPTER 7: Serving Litigants with Limited English Proficiency

"If a person who doesn't speak English doesn't have a lawyer and doesn't have an interpreter, is that access to justice? No, that's not. And, that's why we're here. That's why all of us are trying to do as much as we can to help people."
–Self-Help Center Director

A major accomplishment of self-help expansion was in greatly improving the capacity of self-help centers to serve self-represented litigants with limited English proficiency (LEP). This chapter describes both the expansion of services for LEP litigants and the adoption of technology tools that strengthen the impact of self-help services.

California is home to the most diverse population in the country. Out of nearly 40 million residents, there are approximately 7 million persons with limited English proficiency—over 19 percent of the population in 2015.[96] Collectively, these 7 million people use over 200 languages and are dispersed throughout the entire state.[97] Spanish is by far the most interpreted language in California courtroom proceedings, accounting for 91 percent of the overall interpreter volume in the previous four years.[98] Significantly, 12 percent of all visitors to the California Courts Online Self-Help Center in 2019 (637,817 visitors) used the Spanish-language version of the website.[99]

The impact of limited English proficiency is particularly acute for self-represented litigants. Court proceedings are conducted in English and pleadings must be filed in English. Without language assistance, litigants who do not speak English may literally have no access to the court.

The challenge of language is compounded by lack of familiarity with or information about the fundamentals of California's court system. Most adults with limited English proficiency were raised in other countries with different legal systems and expectations. For example, in Mexico, the person who leaves the home when seeking a divorce is considered to have abandoned their right to the home. This can cause unnecessary conflict if one party in a California case is reluctant to leave in a domestic violence situation because of fears of losing their right to live in the home.

---

[96] U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2009–2013.

[97] Judicial Council of Cal., *Language Access Metrics Report* (Spring 2020), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/LAP-Language-Access-Metric-Report-2020-Spring.pdf.

[98] Judicial Council of Cal., *2020 Language Need and Interpreter Use Study* (Mar. 2020), reporting on FY 2014–15 through FY 2018–19, www.courts.ca.gov/documents/2020-Language-Need-and-Interpreter-Use-Study-Report-to-the-Legislature.pdf; see also www.courts.ca.gov/languageaccess.htm.

[99] Appendix B, Table 46.

California's self-help centers have long worked to address the LEP challenge[100] and have significantly expanded services to LEP customers with the additional $19.1 million in self-help funding. Self-help center staff reported 44 enhancements to LEP services during fiscal year 2018–19 and the first quarter of 2019–20. Added or expanded LEP services included providing services in additional languages, adding bilingual staff, providing workshops and drop-in clinics in other languages, using videoconferencing to access bilingual staff remotely, and implementing language-line translation services.

Twenty-five courts (43 percent) added or expanded Spanish-language services. Twelve courts added or expanded services in other languages. Thirty-two courts (55 percent) hired bilingual staff, and three courts began using videoconferencing to access live interpretation services remotely. Courts added new services in Cantonese, Farsi, Hebrew, Hmong, Korean, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Vietnamese. One court could not hire bilingual staff, so they created collaborative relationships with community service partners to provide services. In all, self-help centers provided services to customers in nearly 180 languages.

As described in Chapter 2, self-help centers conducted a survey of their customers, available in both English and Spanish, during October 2019. The survey was to assess customers' satisfaction with the services they received. When asked what they liked most about the services, many Spanish-speaking customers indicated that they appreciated that they received helped in their native language.[101]

> *"Lo que me gusto fue que hablan espanol y fueron muy amable conmigo y con los demas que estaban en el cuarto. Me explicaron todo super bien."*
>
> *[What I liked was that they speak Spanish and were very friendly with me and with others who were there. They explained everything very well.]*
>
> *–Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Language Support Services

Bilingual Staffing

Self-help centers report that the most efficient and effective way of providing services to LEP court users is to have services provided by a bilingual staff member in the customer's preferred language. Bilingual employees eliminate the time and cost of a court interpreter, and reduce the additional time needed for back-and-forth

[100] See Judicial Council of Cal., *Model Self-Help Pilot Program: A Report to the Legislature* (Mar. 2005); Judicial Council of Cal., *California Courts Self-Help Centers: A Report to the Legislature* (2007).

[101] Note that some people who speak a language other than English at home prefer to receive services in English. They may speak another language at home because their parents are monolingual foreign-language speakers, but the customers themselves use English as a primary language or prefer to conduct business in English. See the findings in the chapter on San Francisco's multilingual self-help center in Judicial Council of Cal., *Model Self-Help Pilot Program: A Report to the Legislature* (Mar. 2005).

interpretation.[102] They also provide a sense of connection and familiarity to LEP court users and build community trust in the judicial system.[103]

Self-help centers reported hiring 84 full-time equivalent (FTE) bilingual staff with the expanded funds they received in fiscal year 2018–19, enabling 40 out of 58 courts to now have bilingual personnel in their self-help centers.[104]

> *"Atencion rapida en espanol claro"*
> *[Fast service in clear Spanish]*
>
> *"Todo fue bien explicadoen el idoma que requeria."*
> *[Everything was well explained in the language that I required.]*
>
> *– Customer Satisfaction Survey*

Bilingual staff in self-help centers must possess a particularly high level of fluency. In explaining the caliber of language skills needed for self-help staff, the *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts* points out,

> different points of contact with the public, by their nature, involve different levels of interaction between staff and a LEP court user. For example, a bilingual court clerk working the cashier window will need to be able to carry out basic monetary transactions in another language with an LEP court user and perhaps provide some standardized information on policies and procedures for paying fines. A bilingual staff person at a self-help center, on the other hand, will have to be able to communicate completely, almost with native-like fluency with an LEP court user needing assistance in understanding court procedures and in preparing forms. The self-help staff person must be able to understand nuanced conversations and questions, provide technical information using the correct legal terminology (in all relevant languages), and be precise in their use of language. A bilingual staff person at the filing counter in the clerk's office may not need to be proficient in writing in another language, but a bilingual [self-help staff person] may have to write instructions in another language or translate documents.[105]

---

[102] *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts*, adopted by the Judicial Council in 2015, recommends that courts identify points of contact that are most critical for LEP court users (such as self-help centers) and, whenever possible, place qualified bilingual staff at these locations. A handout, *Points of Contact for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Court Users*, shows the appropriate language standards and language access necessary to help court staff meet the needs of LEP court users at critical points of contact (see www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lap-toolkit-Points_of_Contact.pdf).

[103] *Model Self-Help Pilot Program* (evaluation of Spanish-speaking model).

[104] Appendix B, Table 3.

[105] Judicial Council of Cal., *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts* (2015) at p. 60, www.courts.ca.gov/documents/CLASP_report_060514.pdf.

Self-help centers report that having trained bilingual staff[106] allows those staff members to provide brief informational services in roughly the same amount of time as it takes to deliver information to English speakers.[107] Because of the fluency requirement, questions and explanations are conversational, not disjointed or reliant on a third-party interpreter. However, as the needs of the litigant become more complex, the amount of time that is needed to assist each individual increases. This can place a significant strain on a bilingual self-help staff person. In any given conversation, the bilingual staffer must sight translate forms, orders, and other documents from English to the litigant's language. The bilingual staffer will then often need to assist the litigant with completing forms by translating their answers into English and serving as the litigant's scribe.

Self-help staff also report that many LEP litigants require additional explanations of each step of the legal process. This appears to be due to cultural and procedural differences between the court system in the litigant's native country and the legal system in California. Legal issues can also become more complex if the other party resides in a different country. For example, proper service of legal papers is much more complicated when one party lives in a different country.[108]

Bilingual Volunteers

As recommended in the *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts*, some self-help centers use bilingual volunteers.[109] Eleven courts reported having interns or volunteers assist LEP customers. Similar to the benefits of bilingual staff, volunteers and interns often offer language and cultural fluency to the people they assist, but without the cost of salaries and benefits.

Another six courts utilize volunteers from the JusticeCorps program using funding provided by an AmeriCorps grant.[110] In 2019, 286 college students, 62 percent of whom were bilingual, served as JusticeCorps members, each providing at least 300 hours of volunteer service in self-help centers in Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Mateo Counties. In addition to the training they receive on legal issues, court procedures, ethics, and related topics, all JusticeCorps members receive half-day training on serving litigants with limited English proficiency. Members who are bilingual or multilingual receive advanced training. In 2019, JusticeCorps members assisted litigants in 17 languages.

While utilizing volunteers has many benefits, it also has challenges. Volunteers often work limited times or for a specific term and it can be difficult to replace their language and cultural competency when their terms are up. Bilingual volunteers and interns require proper training and

[106] Superior courts set their own standards for training and designating staff as bilingual. The Judicial Council provides guidance on this process through the Language Access Services program.

[107] Focus group on serving litigants with limited English proficiency.

[108] *Ibid.*

[109] Recommendation 34.

[110] For additional information on the JusticeCorps program, see www.courts.ca.gov/justicecorps.htm.

supervision and thus, unless, like JusticeCorps members, the volunteers can make a significant time commitment, using volunteers may not warrant that investment of time in training and supervision.

Telephone Interpretation Services

While courts strive to have bilingual staff on hand, those staff are not always available, and it is seldom possible to have staff fluent in all the languages that court customers speak. Telephonic interpretation services often are the only effective way that a self-help center can provide timely services for some litigants. Almost all court self-help centers reported using telephonic interpretation services. Only two courts reported that they do not use the services because they reported needing interpretation services only in Spanish and they have sufficient bilingual English/Spanish staff. Although it is not a direct cost to the self-help program, telephonic interpretation is an example of court tools that may be available to self-help centers that increase their efficiency.

The telephonic language services require little in the way of equipment; courts simply supply staff with a phone handset splitter and an extra handset for the litigant. Staff use their handset to call the service, the litigant uses the extra handset, then the interpreter is called to provide assistance.

There are challenges to utilizing an interpreter service; for example, it takes more time. Since each side of the conversation has to be interpreted, the time needed for an interpreted conversation is at least twice as long as a conversation that flows between a bilingual staffer and the litigant. Thus, a person who might be served by a bilingual staff member in 15 minutes may require 30 minutes or more with an interpreter.

Since self-help assistance utilizing interpreters takes additional time, litigants may have to schedule an additional appointment. What might be accomplished in one appointment for an English speaker could take two appointments due to the additional time required for interpretation.[111]

Videoconferencing

The remote services discussed in Chapter 8 are being used to improve self-help services for LEP litigants. Videoconferencing technology can connect an LEP court user in one court location with a bilingual employee in another location. This connection means that language assistance can be provided in multiple courthouses without having to hire bilingual staff at each location. Besides using videoconferencing technology for ad hoc encounters, self-help centers can broadcast informational workshops in languages other than English from a single location to

[111] Focus group on serving litigants with limited English proficiency.

additional sites via videoconferencing. Consequently, LEP court users may have access to workshops at locations more convenient to them.[112]

How Services Are Provided

California court self-help centers provide services to LEP litigants using various modes of service delivery. The modes vary based on resources available and the needs of the community, but generally include one-on-one assistance, workshops, online resources, and forms.

One-on-One Assistance

To the extent that interpreter services are available, using bilingual staff, volunteers, courtroom interpreters, or telephonic services, all centers strive to provide one-on-one assistance in the language that the customer prefers. As described in Chapter 4, one-on-one assistance provides the litigant with the greatest amount of time and attention without disrupting a workshop or clinic setting.

"Me trataron muy bien y me explicaron todo en mi idioma ademas de resolver todas mis dudas de manera muy clara."

[They treated me very well and explained everything to me in my language in addition to resolving all my concerns in a very clear way.]

–Customer Satisfaction Survey

During calendar year 2019, self-help centers reported 37,211 LEP litigant visits with services provided in a language other than English.[113]

Workshops

Nine counties reported offering 68 workshops in languages other than English, with Spanish workshops the most common by June 2019. Two divorce workshops were offered in Armenian and one in Russian. One court offered three divorce workshops and one elder abuse petition workshop in Vietnamese.[114] Figure 23 shows the frequency of topics in the workshops provided in Spanish.

[112] Judicial Council of Cal., *Technological Options for Providing and Sharing Court Language Access Services Outside the Courtroom* (Jan. 2018), p. 7.

[113] Appendix B, Table 31.

[114] Appendix B, Table 17.

Figure 23. Workshops Offered in Spanish

Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports, FY 2017–18 through FY 2019–20.

Holding workshops in the primary language of the self-represented litigant has several benefits: (1) The litigant receives information that they understand, directly, rather than through an interpreter. (2) Since the workshop is tailored to people who speak the same language, cultural differences can be addressed. (3) A litigant who attends a workshop with others who speak their language experiences a sense of trust and camaraderie—a feeling that they are not the only one going through the process.

> *"The workshops we do in Spanish can take on a different style. Where the English version could be like a presentation, the Spanish versions tend to be more like a dialogue and people are referencing their own knowledge about what they believe the court system is like or should be like. And then we are relating to that and then helping them understand what's expected of them in this system."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Attorney*

Despite these advantages, there can be difficulty identifying enough people seeking self-help support on the same topic in a narrow enough time period to enable the workshop to be both timely to the litigants and cost-effective to present.

Translated Website and Instructional Materials

Courts also use translated handouts and other instructional guides to provide assistance to LEP litigants. The Judicial Council provides many translated resources statewide. Courts also develop translated resources for their jurisdictions. Self-help centers are encouraged to share their instructional materials and translations on the Judicial Council's "Equal Access" website[115] so that other courts can review and adapt those resources, or so that they can be adapted for statewide use.

The California Courts Online Self-Help Center is a robust resource for self-help centers, providing hundreds of pages of information for court users in English (*www.courts.ca.gov/selfhelp.htm*) and in its mirror Spanish-language website (*www.sucorte.ca.gov*). It also incorporates videos on issues such as mediation in small claims court, landlord-tenant actions, and civil harassment cases. These are available in English, Spanish, and Russian. There also are videos in English and Spanish pertaining to child custody, juvenile delinquency, and juvenile dependency processes. Video- and audio-based information benefits not only LEP users, but also English speakers who have low literacy or who prefer to receive information through mechanisms other than written materials.[116] Most courts found it most effective to link to the statewide website and avoid the costs of development, maintenance, and translation for their own website and materials. The Judicial Council uses professional translation services and has bilingual attorneys review all Spanish-language content to ensure that the translations are legally accurate.

[115] Available at *www.courts.ca.gov/partners/equalaccess.htm*.

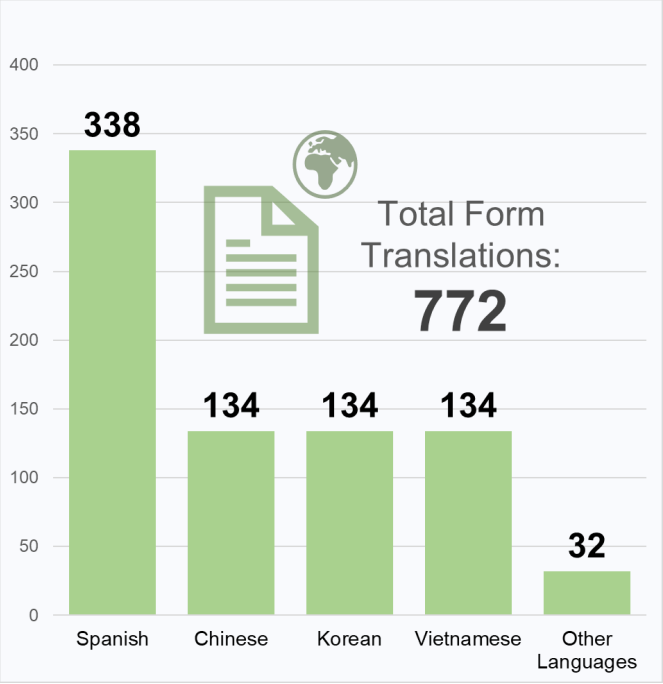
[116] *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts* at p. 51.

Despite the availability of online Spanish-language resources, only 11 percent of Spanish-speaking customers reported that they had looked online for legal information before coming to the self-help center, compared to 30 percent of English speakers. In 2019, the Spanish-language version of the self-help website received 637,817 individual users compared to 4,649,755 individual users on the English-language site. Since 81 percent of users browsing on the Spanish-language site do so on a mobile device versus 57 percent of users browsing on the English-language site, it is important to continue to make the website as mobile-friendly as possible. Such efforts are underway with a redesign of the California Courts Online Self-Help Center, which will be launched in 2021. Publicizing the availability of these resources will help more Spanish-speaking customers to research their issues and address some problems without a trip to the courthouse.[117]

Translated Forms

The Judicial Council has developed and approved 1,406 forms for use by the public and made them available on the California Courts website: 338 of the most commonly used forms have been translated into Spanish, as have 48 information sheets; 134 forms are also available in other languages.

Figure 24. Most Common Languages for Translated Forms



Source: Self-Help Center Grant program quarterly reports, FY 2017–18 through FY 2019–20. The Judicial Council forms are available at www.courts.ca.gov/allforms.htm.

[117] Appendix B, Tables 32 and 46.

Forms are most commonly translated into Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Forms also are available in Arabic, Tagalog, Punjabi, Russian, Cambodian, Farsi, and Hmong.

Statewide Translation of Forms

Under the *Translation Protocol*, as recommended by the *Strategic Plan for Language Access in the California Courts*, priority for translation is given to information sheets and forms commonly used by self-represented litigants,[118] because attorneys normally complete forms for their clients and provide clients the information they need in their cases. It is important to note, however, that translated forms are only for instructional purposes; only the English-language version may be filed with the courts.

Many self-help centers use the translated forms to help LEP litigants understand the issues important to the court. The forms provide LEP users with greater comprehension of what is required, increasing their ability to participate in the legal process in a meaningful way, even if their forms must ultimately be prepared and submitted in English. Thirty-one court self-help centers report using translated forms to help self-represented LEP litigants. Self-help centers in six counties stated they have litigants complete the translated form and then staff translates the information provided into English. Eighteen self-help centers said they use the forms for vocabulary terms; 30 centers said they use the translated form to explain what the English-language form is asking.

Other centers use different approaches. One center responded, "We do not do this a lot because then people become frustrated that they cannot file the form in Spanish. What we do more is create homework handouts in Spanish—for instance for Guardianship or Limited Conservatorship. The customer completes in Spanish and staff uses the information to type the forms in English."

Translation of forms on a statewide level offers several efficiencies. Centralizing the work and maintaining a consistent glossary ensures the linguistic consistency of translated terms. This results in greater accuracy of legal terms, which can be challenging to translate. There are also significant cost savings. Boilerplate language that has been professionally and officially translated reduces the total requiring translation in subsequent work. Subject matter glossaries have been developed, working with professional translators and in-house subject matter experts, resulting in terminology banks that can be called upon when there is a new form, information sheet, or web content requiring translation. This ensures consistency across platforms and immediately reduces the cost of translations.

Exploring Machine Translation

While there is no substitute for a qualified interpreter or bilingual staff, there simply are too few in California to meet the needs of all litigants in all self-help centers in the state. There may be

[118] Judicial Council of Cal., *Translation Protocol* (July 2016), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lap-Translation-Protocol.pdf.

some merit in utilizing, where appropriate, technology for translation and communication services outside of the courtroom, including for services provided by self-help centers.

Voice-to-text language technology is improving at a rapid pace, and other organizations in both the public and private sector are looking to this technology to enhance their services for persons with limited English proficiency. The Commission on the Future of California's Court System recommended that the Judicial Council conduct and evaluate a voice-to-text pilot to serve court users at court filing and service counters and in self-help centers.[119] The Judicial Council's Information Technology Advisory Committee is taking the lead to implement this pilot. A voice-to-text pilot will provide helpful information for the branch on the development of guidelines and will build on the findings of a previous pilot project conducted in 2018 and 2019 by the Stanford Law School Legal Design Lab, which worked with the Superior Court of Santa Clara County Self-Help Center and the Judicial Council's Language Access Services Program.[120]

[119] Commission on the Future of California's Court System, *Report to the Chief Justice* (2017), at p. 232.

[120] Stanford University Legal Design Lab, *Design Report: Language Access Innovations in Court: How Can Courts Use Technology & Design to Support People in Court When They're Not Proficient in English?* (Feb. 2019) (a technology-policy report for the Judicial Council of California produced in the 2018 fall quarter course "Design for Justice: Language Access"; Margaret Hagan, Jonty Markby Olliff-Cooper, Janet Martinez, and Kursat Ozenc, instructors).

CHAPTER 8: Remote Services

"I like online because my schedule is very hectic and it was nice to still get help from home." [121]

Remote services are transforming court-based self-help centers. Remote services allowed self-help centers to rapidly respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and, after only three months, return to serving nearly the same number of customers per month that they had been serving in the month before the shutdown. When the pandemic recedes, the investment in technology and remote services will allow self-help centers to assist self-represented litigants without requiring them to take time away from work or childcare to make potentially lengthy visits to the court. Implementing remote services for self-help in the judicial branch involves a close collaboration among service design and testing, involving local court initiatives, Judicial Council programs, Court Innovations Grant Program projects, and the self-help expansion resources that have allowed courts to deploy the services. This chapter addresses both aspects of remote service expansion. Delivery models such as live chat and web portals with secure communication are being piloted and refined, while other models such as shared videoconferencing among small courts were scaled up to a robust service and scaled out to a broad base of users.

Courts used self-help expansion funding in fiscal year 2018–19 to add and expand remote services. In 2019, before the pandemic, 47,824 or 9 percent of litigants who received in-depth, one-on-one services were served remotely. Figure 25 shows the breakdown of these remote services. Telephone remote services accounted for a little more than half (52 percent) of all remote services provided, followed by email (26 percent). Services that were introduced and expanded with new funding continue to be regularly improved and augmented. In April 2020, after the pandemic began, 76 percent of litigants who received in-depth, one-on-one services were served remotely.

Expanding remote services in self-help centers requires projects to develop and pilot these service delivery methods. Development efforts included the Judicial Council's Court Innovations Grant Program pilot projects, which began in 2017,[122] and collaboration projects between the Judicial Council and the courts such as the Live Chat Pilot Project, the Self-Help Portal, and the California Courts Online Self-Help Center. In addition, courts worked with the Judicial Council to develop e-filing through self-help centers and web portals for secure communication with self-represented litigants.

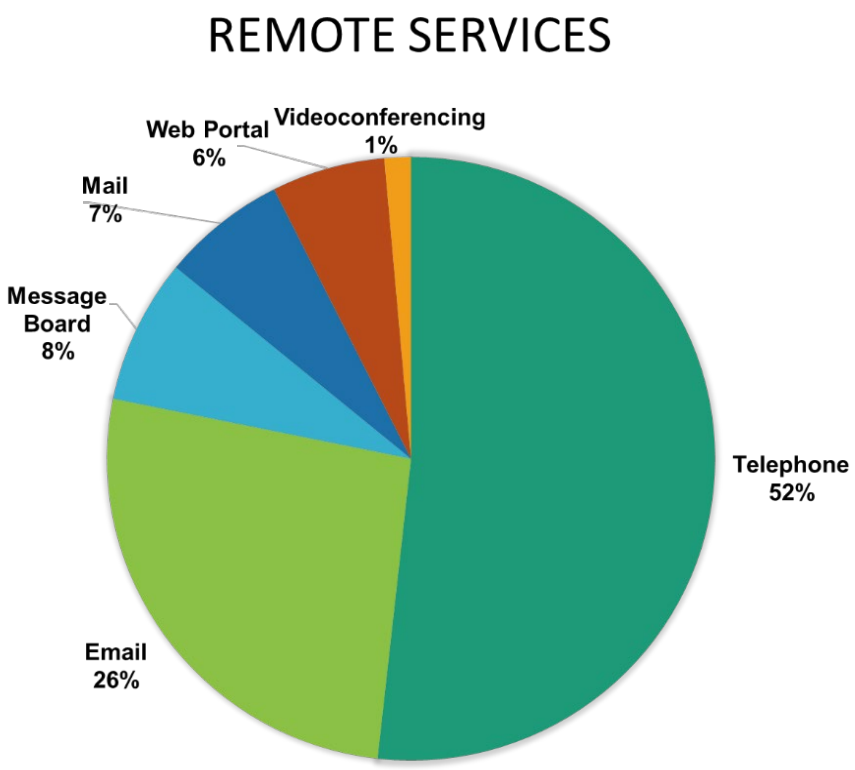
The expansion of remote services in self-help centers was also greatly enhanced by the judicial branch's strategic planning for technology infrastructure that included goals and initiatives to

[121] Superior Court of Ventura County online workshop participant.

[122] Judicial Council of Cal., *Report on the Judicial Council's Court Innovations Grant Program* (Sept. 8, 2017), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lr-2017-JC-court-innovations.pdf.

promote the digital court through the expanded use of electronic court records, language access technologies, and video remote appearances. The challenges to scaling out remote services include the limited access of many low-income Californians to adequate broadband internet, limits on smartphone data plans, lack of privacy when using shared spaces such as a library or a shelter, and unreliable access to email.[123]

Figure 25. Remote Services, 2019



Source: STARS Customer Information Database and Self-Help Quarterly Report. See Appendix B, Table 21.

Notes: n = 47,824. This chart adds Message Board data reported in quarterly reports, increasing the number of interactions shown in Table 1. "Other" includes videoconferencing, texting, live chat, and other remote services.

Phone Services

Before the pandemic, phone services were provided by all self-help centers but only used in 9 percent of one-on-one, in-depth service visits. Self-help centers greatly expanded phone services during the pandemic and are incorporating lessons learned to improve the effectiveness of the services.

[123] California Commission on Access to Justice, *Remote Hearings and Access to Justice During COVID-19 and Beyond* (May 18, 2020).

Phone services may serve as the only form of self-help assistance a litigant receives; however, self-help centers have learned to package them with one or more other services to address a litigant's needs. For instance, in one court that implemented a live chat service, the self-help staff identified live chat as "an avenue to phone services." An automated chat service can respond to a significant percentage of high-level issues, but this court also believes it is important to do a "warm handoff" to court staff for a live phone conversation, where more in-depth discussions are possible for people with more complex inquiries.[124] Many other courts report using phones as a first contact point, with more in-depth legal services provided either in person or through another remote service delivery method.[125]

Email Services

Email is the second most common form of remote service provided by self-help centers. As with phone service, self-help centers have evaluated their use of email and identified improved modes of delivery to meet the demand triggered by the pandemic. In 2019, 36 counties used email to communicate with the public and reported providing assistance by email 12,599 times. Email may offer a better opportunity for communication than phone contact because email is not dependent on the litigant answering the phone to hear the message. Email can also be a more flexible form of communication than telephone because litigants and self-help center staff can email at any time, including outside normal business hours.[126]

Email and text communications can also be integrated with workshop appointment technology to send self-help center customers reminders and reduce no-shows. Being able to make appointments online can be very helpful, but given the stress that many litigants are under, email reminders can be a very important way to ensure that they attend their appointments.

Self-help centers use email communications to:

- schedule appointments;
- send appointment reminders;
- gather information;
- answer questions;
- send forms;
- send information and instructions;
- assist with long-distance matters; and
- assist with case-specific questions.

[124] Videoconferencing and Live Chat focus group.

[125] Appendix B, Tables 1 and 21.

[126] Appendix B, Table 21; Rural focus group.

Web Portal

The Superior Court of Sacramento County has developed a secure web portal for communication with self-represented litigants. This portal requires the user to register for the court's secure email services and provide proof of identity. Proof of identity enables the self-help center staff to provide the litigant information via secure email about confidential cases such as parentage and governmental child support. The system also stores all online communications between the litigant and the self-help staff in one place so conversations that occur over time can be reviewed easily, saving time by identifying any past issues in the case and ensuring that consistent information is provided. The court provided assistance 2,858 times using this portal in 2019.

Live Chat Services

Besides phone and in-person services, another way self-help services are made more accessible to the public is through live chat services. Live chat allows customers to enter questions on a website and have those questions answered by a person in real time. Unlike a phone call or an in-person visit where court staff can only have a single conversation with one person at a time, live chat allows an attorney or other staff person to interact with multiple people at the same time, thereby serving more customers.

Live Chat Pilot Project

In fiscal year 2018–19, the Judicial Council conducted a pilot program to develop and test a live chat feature on the California Courts Online Self-Help Center website to assist customers with questions about the process to legally change one's name. The live chat pilot project is an example of remote service delivery implementation that was piloted by the judicial branch to determine how the technology can become part of the self-help center portfolio of services.

The live chat pilot site was available three hours a day, three days a week over a 21-week period, and provided data showing that members of the public used the site most frequently in the morning and early afternoon. The live chat pilot found that one attorney could interact with almost all (96 percent) of users who initiated a chat. On average the attorney interacted with from 3 to 5 users at a time, exchanging an average of 16 messages in interactions that lasted 16 minutes each. A total 1,300 users were served. Following are the summary findings of the pilot:

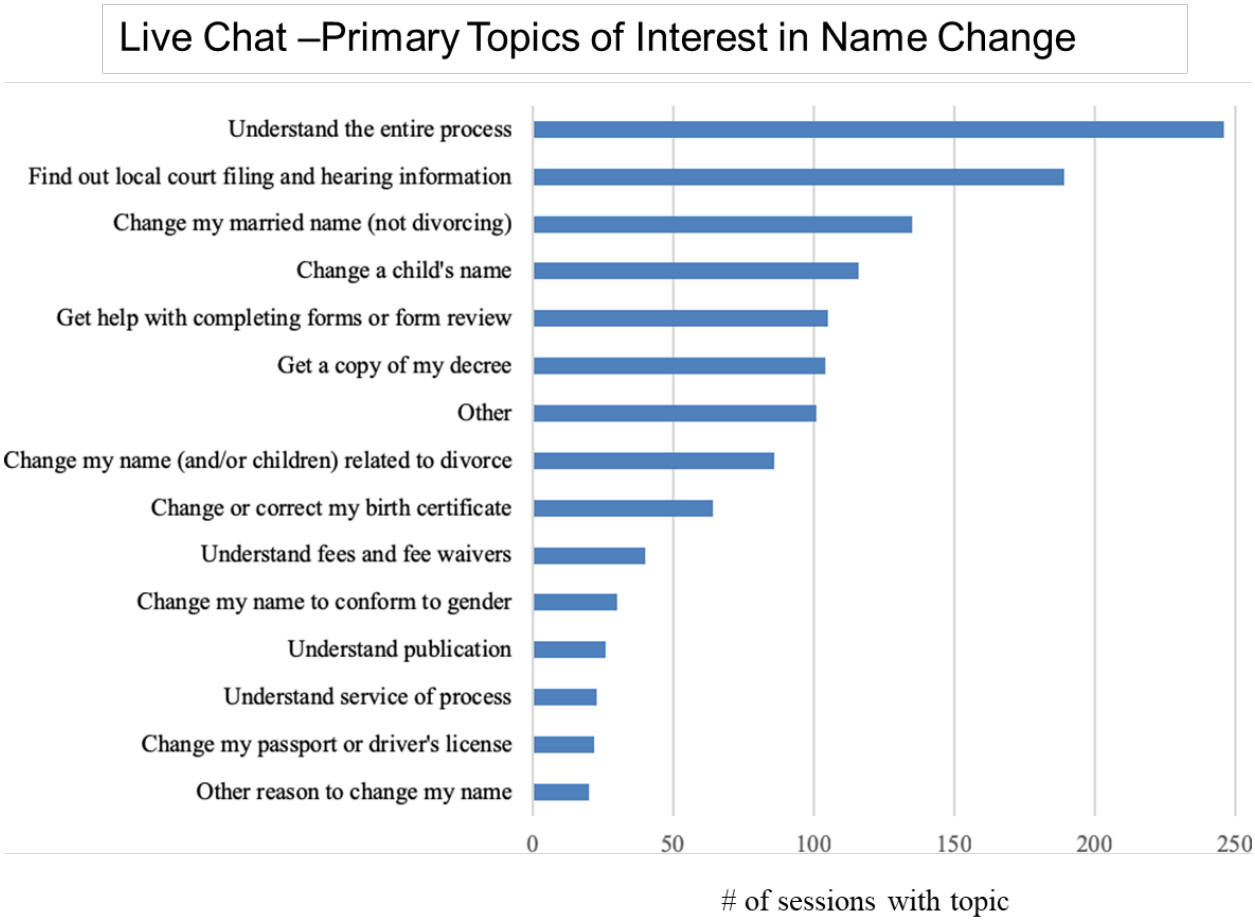
- *LiveChat could be used as a triage tool by self-help centers to assist users who cannot travel to a courthouse, those who may not be ready to or need to file a court case, and users who can quickly be referred to another service.*

- *LiveChat services were well-received and highly rated by users, and records of all interactions were instantly available for monitoring for quality.*

- *LiveChat services are economical and relatively efficient, allowing trained agents to assist three to five users at once with only a computer and an internet connection.*[127]

An invaluable component of the pilot project was the collection of data about the demand for court services. Most inquiries were about the name change process. This data is being used to expand the information available on the California Courts Online Self-Help Center website with frequently asked questions and information about local procedures for processing name change requests.

Figure 26. Live Chat—Primary Topic



Source: Judicial Council Live Chat Pilot Project: Final Report (2019). See source for dates and details of data collection in 2019. N=1,307 live chat users.

[127] Judicial Council of Cal., *Judicial Council Live Chat Pilot Project: Final Report* (2019), p. 2, www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/JUDICIAL-COUNCIL-LIVECHAT-PILOT-PROJECT-FINAL-REPORT-2019.pdf.

Live Chat in Self-Help Centers

As of June 30, 2020, there are four courts using live chat as a tool to deliver self-help services, with several others exploring the adoption of the technology. Utilizing the Court Innovations Grant Program, the first court to implement a live chat feature was the Superior Court of San Mateo.[128] San Mateo was able to build on the Judicial Council pilot project. The San Mateo court in turn shared their experience with the courts in San Francisco, Alameda, and Santa Clara Counties to aid in their rollout of live chat services.

The Judicial Council is also using the results of this pilot to build a "chatbot," which is an automated system that can answer common questions while having a live agent provide backup to address complex questions that the chatbot cannot answer.

Live chat is a highly efficient means of assisting people with basic information and preparing them for a more detailed interaction with self-help center staff. The next step is scaling out live chat services to more self-help centers. Based on findings and lessons learned from the pilot project, Judicial Council staff developed the *Live Chat Toolkit*,[129] with recommendations for local courts on developing live chat programs and, should the court implement live chat to assist court users with the name change petition, ready-to-use name change content. The toolkit also contains a road map for important considerations, from budgeting and planning to implementation, as well as model procedures for training and supporting live chat agents.

> *"Well done; clarified my understanding and provided some important details I had been unable to locate through the ca court web pages. Bravo!"*
>
> *–Live Chat Participant*

Videoconferencing Services

SHARP Tech Connect Innovation Pilot

The judicial branch piloted connecting a large group of rural courts through videoconferencing to address the challenges that rural self-help centers face in attempting to provide a full range of services to self-represented litigants in their counties. Those challengers include too few customers with the same legal topic to justify providing workshops, part-time center attorney staff who do not have expertise in every legal topic, lack of access to bilingual staff, and a population living far from the center itself with no access to public transportation.

This pilot, the SHARP Tech Connect project, was initiated through the Court Innovations Grant Program.

> *"[The chat agent] helped me answer questions I could not figure out just by researching the website. She was very helpful; this is a great service. I very much appreciate being able to get help this way!!"*
>
> *–Live Chat Participant*

[128] Judicial Council of Cal., *Report on the Court Innovations Grant Program* (Sept. 30, 2020), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/lr-2020-Court-Innovations-Grant-Program-Report-to-Legislature.pdf.

[129] *Live Chat Toolkit* (June 2019), www.courts.ca.gov/partners/documents/Live-Chat-Toolkit.pdf.

The pilot comprises a network of 22 courts that leverage resources to provide common workshop content among courts, which can be adapted, as appropriate, to address local forms and processes without the need to recreate the entire workshop. An instructor in one location can deliver a workshop to all 22courts, allowing staff in those other counties to assist other customers. Center staff at each location can then review forms completed in the workshop and assist their litigants with next steps for filing in their jurisdictions.

During the self-help expansion, SHARP Tech Connect proved to be an efficient and successful model for increasing services with the new expansion funding. The SHARP Tech Connect innovations grant project had already improved the broadband capacity of sites within the 22 rural courts to support real-time videoconferencing. In order to overcome geographical barriers, the project also placed computers with web cameras, microphones, and speakers or headphones in libraries and social services agencies in communities that were distant from the courthouse. Staff in those agencies assisted litigants with making a video connection to the self-help center staff, who then helped the litigants with their legal issues. This saved significant travel time and allowed more litigants to have face-to-face video assistance.

Videoconference workshops help litigants properly complete their forms. In 2015, the Butte court collected data on 50 participants in workshops conducted by remote videoconferencing. Program staff reviewed court records to discover how many of the workshop participants filed papers developed during the workshops and of those, how many obtained relief and how many did not. Of the 35 participants who filed papers prepared during the videoconference workshop, all documents were completed correctly and none were dismissed on procedural grounds.[130]

Individual Videoconference Appointments

Self-help centers have also embraced videoconferencing technology to overcome geographical barriers to services. Courts in counties that are geographically large or with rugged terrain were early adopters who realized they could save their court customers travel time and be able to serve more people by using videoconferencing.

Videoconference Webinars in Ventura

The Superior Court of Ventura County also received innovation grant funds[131] and uses a video conferencing platform to hold workshops with litigants who are conferencing in from their personal computers and cellphones. Parties sign up in advance for these workshops, allowing the presenters to review parties' files and prepare to address specific questions. The presenters can show slide or video presentations, pull up online fillable Judicial Council forms from the California Courts website, demonstrate how to complete the forms, and link to prerecorded

[130] Self-Represented Litigation Network, *Serving Self-Represented Litigants Remotely: A Resource Guide* (July 1, 2016) at p. 24, prepared by John Greacen, Greacen Associates LLC.

[131] *Report on the Court Innovations Grant Program.*

materials. Program staff can move individual litigants into separate online breakout groups if they have many questions or their situation is particularly sensitive.

Ventura's program staff noted that videoconference workshops can be a more time- and cost-efficient way to deliver self-help services: "For example, to provide self-help services for the first phase of a Civil Harassment Restraining Order [for 10 to 20 people individually] is over five to 10 hours of staff time. Utilizing an online workshop model, one person can provide informational assistance to up to 10–20 litigants in a two-hour session."

Supporting Language Access

Another benefit of using videoconferencing platforms is the ability to use bilingual staff at one center to assist litigants in connected centers who do not have that language capacity in-house. Rather than make another appointment for a person with limited English skills or use a telephone language service (which takes longer than speaking to the person directly in their language), staff can access a bilingual staff member with the appropriate language skills who works in a different location, and then place the litigant in front of the computer to speak directly with that person. This saves time, assures that the correct information is exchanged, and makes it easier and more comfortable for the litigant.

Mail Services

Some litigants have no access to help other than through the U.S. mail. As described in greater detail in Chapter 12, postal mail is sometimes the only method for assisting persons who are incarcerated, but it is also the primary method of communication for individuals with transportation, mobility, and connectivity limitations. Self-help centers provided assistance by mail 3,178 times in 2019. Responding to mail can be relatively simple when the self-represented litigant's questions can be addressed by sending them standard forms packets and instructions. Otherwise self-help center staff provide responses in writing to those members of the public who do not have access to any other means of communication with the court.[132]

Text-Messaging Services and Online Scheduling Tools

Courts have recently begun to use text messaging to answer litigant questions and provide litigant reminders. More common was the use of text messaging combined with online scheduling tools to set appointments and reminders for litigants. While some courts have developed specialized appointment-setting tools, others are using off-the-shelf applications and software platforms to schedule litigants' individual appointments, videoconference sessions, and workshops. In 2019, 17 court-based self-help centers reported using online applications to set appointments while another 5 reported allowing litigants to schedule appointments using the self-help center's email system. Although this function not a direct cost to the self-help program,

[132] Appendix B, Table 1.

it is an example of court tools that may be available to self-help centers that increase their efficiency. The goal of courts using this application is to reduce no-shows.[133]

Secure Private Message Center

The Superior Court of San Diego County piloted a secure private message center. As of August 2020, more than 3,700 litigants had signed up to use the system, allowing staff to answer questions and provide information without the customer needing to come to the courthouse.[134]

The online message board is not just for questions from the litigant to the court. Use of the message board allows the staff to alert litigants to future court hearings and next steps in their cases. When staff review files to prepare for hearings or settlement conferences, they can alert the participants to mistakes in paperwork and provide options to help them resolve issues.[135]

The message board is available to any person who is self-represented and has a family law case filed with the Superior Court of San Diego County. Participants normally sign up when visiting the family law facilitator's office; at a minimum, prospective message board users must visit the facilitator's office and show identification to verify that they are a party to the case in order to ensure that remote electronic access to court files is properly limited to parties and their attorneys.[136] Once signed up, parties receive an email whenever a message is posted to their accounts. The messages can be read by both parties to a family law case.

Early reports of this San Diego project show that more than half of the users complete their business in less than five minutes using the message board. This is a substantially quicker way to access court information compared to the time and effort required to get to the courthouse, go through security, wait in the self-help line, explain the issues to the self-help staff, receive an answer, and then return home.[137]

Self-Help Web Content

With general materials such as court forms, plain language guides for the public, and materials translated into other languages available online for self-service, self-help centers in California are largely able to devote their resources full time to assisting self-represented litigants with topics that are specific to their situation. This ensures that the resources provided for expansion are focused on direct assistance to the public.

---

[133] Self-help center quarterly reports, FY 2019–20.

[134] Court communication.

[135] Superior Court of San Diego County, "Family Law Facilitator Message Board," *www.sdcourt.ca.gov/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/SDCOURT/FAMILYANDCHILDREN2/FAMILYSELFHELP/WELCOME%20TO%20THE%20MESSAGE%20BOARD%20OF%20THE%20SAN%20DIEGO%20SUPERIOR%20COURT%20FAMILY%20LAW%20FACILITATOR.PDF*.

[136] Cal. Rules of Court, rule 2.503.

[137] Court communication.

"California Courts Online Self-Help Center" Website

The Judicial Council maintains extensive self-help resources on the California Courts Online Self-Help Center website,[138] which was launched in 2001. It contains hundreds of pages of information that are continually updated on issues faced by self-represented litigants, including family law, landlord-tenant issues, small claims cases, probate guardianships and conservatorships, restraining orders for domestic violence, civil harassment, elder abuse, and a host of other topics. Also, the entire site has been translated into Spanish.[139] Instructional guides are provided for forms that litigants must use for their cases. These forms can be filled out online at no cost, printed at home, and filed with the court. Links to a wide variety of resources, including court self-help centers, legal aid agencies, and community resources for issues such as homelessness and domestic violence programs, are also provided.

All local court websites are linked to the Online Self-Help Center. As well as saving resources on the local level, this ensures that self-represented litigants statewide are receiving consistent information.

In 2019, 4,649,755 individual users came to the English-language version of the California Courts self-help website, and 637,817 individual users came to the Spanish-language website.[140]

Figure 27, showing the most-visited pages (top pageviews) on the California Courts Online Self-Help Center website, gives an indication of the diversity of topics for which people are seeking assistance.

[138] Available at *www.courts.ca.gov/selfhelp.htm*.

[139] See *Cortes de California Centro de Ayuda, www.sucorte.ca.gov*.

[140] Appendix B, Table 46.

Figure 27. "California Courts Online Self-Help Center" Top Pageviews in 2019

Source: Judicial Council Web Analytics 2020. See Appendix B, Table 41.

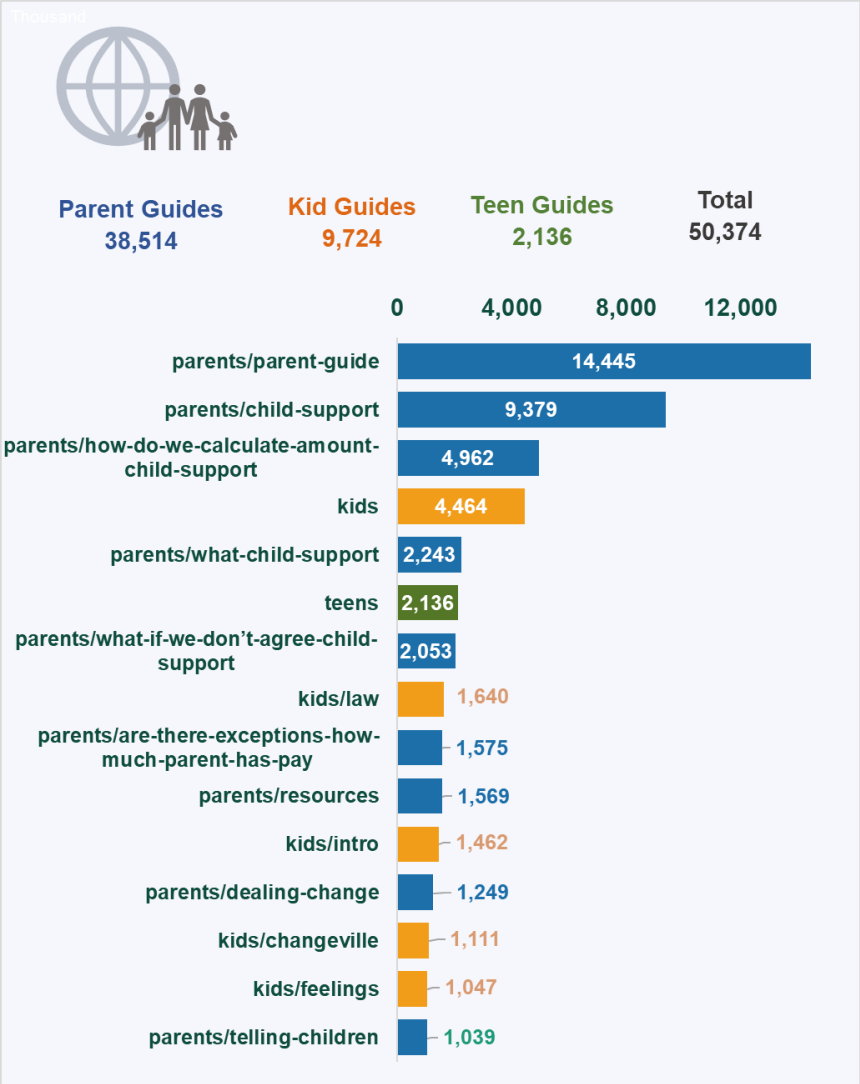
"Families Change" Website

The Judicial Council maintains a website called "Families Change,"[141] which is available in both English and Spanish, that provides extensive information on family law issues for children, teens, and parents in a colorful, interactive, and age-appropriate manner. As with the California Courts Online Self-Help Center, state-level administration of this website allows courts to focus their efforts and expansion funding on direct service to self-represented litigants.

In 2019 there were 52,252 users of the "Families Change" website who participated in 61,549 sessions. Figure 28 shows the top 15 webpages that people visited. It demonstrates the website's variety of issues and target audiences.

[141] Available at www.familieschange.ca.gov/.

Figure 28. "Families Change" Top Pageviews in 2019



Source: "Families Change" California Website Statistics 2019/2020, June 30, 2020, Justice Education Society. Appendix B, Table 39.

Among the features included on the site is an online parenting education class that provides three hours of free, online, video-based classes to help parents help their children during divorce or separation. This is a particularly helpful resource for parents who cannot afford parenting classes or personal counseling to address the heartache and frustrations often associated with divorce. The resource is also of great value for those who live in areas with limited community-based resources, or for families who cannot schedule classes around a working parent's obligations. In 2019, 11,863 persons took at least some portion of the parenting class. Of those, 2,578 persons

finished the three-hour "Parenting After Separation" course[142] and received a certificate of completion; 2,352 graduates of the course took it in English and 226 took it in Spanish.

Another resource for families is a class called "Finances After Separation" that helps explain child support, spousal support, and division-of-property issues. It provides suggestions on how to negotiate and resolve issues with the other parent. In 2019, 3,800 persons participated in this class.

The Judicial Council maintains these websites with up-to-date information, forms, and rules. It also ensures that the Spanish-language website is professionally translated and reviewed by a fully bilingual attorney to ensure the accuracy of the translation. These resources are linked to individual court websites, avoiding the need for duplicative efforts by local courts. These centralized sources of up-to-date information are regularly updated, improved upon, and expanded.

The California Courts website provides links to other web resources. For example, the "Find Your Court"[143] webpage provides links to information on local courts' websites describing the hours and services provided by their self-help centers. The California Courts website also links to "LawHelp CA,"[144] the statewide legal services website run by the Legal Aid Association of California that provides information on legal services programs throughout the state. By maintaining cross-referrals of information, courts and legal aid agencies need only update one statewide source.

Digital Services

High-volume usage of self-help websites is a strong indicator of public interest in online services. In 2020, nearly half of all traffic to the California Courts website, *www.courts.ca.gov*, the judicial branch's public website, was for visits to the California Courts Online Self-Help Center.

Since 2018, self-help center expansion has coordinated with the California Courts Digital Services Conceptual Design Project's development of a new online assistance portal for self-represented litigants. The portal was initiated by the Information Technology Advisory Committee's Self-Represented Litigant Workstream to implement recommendations from the Chief Justice's Commission on the Future of California's Court System. By leveraging online, digital services, self-help centers can increase the reach and value of self-help assistance available to litigants. The goal is to make basic procedures available online so that self-help center staff have more time for complex matters and for litigants less likely to use online services.

---

[142] Available at *https://pas.familieschange.ca.gov/*.

[143] "Find Your Court," *www.courts.ca.gov/find-my-court.htm?query=*.

[144] Available at *www.lawhelpca.org/legal-directory*.

In 2020, the Judicial Council released new digital services to streamline the experience of finding court forms,[145] locating the right courthouse, and making an ability-to-pay request.[146] By 2021, the Judicial Council will build on the success of existing online resources with a new statewide self-represented litigant e-service portal (SRL Portal), offering a suite of new digital information and services presented in a simple, step-by-step format that is intuitive and easy to use. The goal is to help litigants confidently take the next step in their case, using the device of their choice.

The first five case types in development are divorce, small claims, restraining orders, consumer debt, and landlord-tenant. These drive 70 percent of all in-person encounters at self-help centers across the state and 50 percent of all civil filings (excluding traffic), and 75 percent of pageviews on the current California Courts Online Self-Help Center website.

The function and design of the SRL Portal is informed by observation of and consultation with self-help centers in 30 courts and user testing with hundreds of court users and self-help staff. Developed in close collaboration with local court staff, the portal will be used by self-help centers in a variety of ways, including referring litigants to the portal for next steps in their cases and as an educational aid. The portal will thus increase the capacity for self-help centers to focus on more complex matters and expanded services. The portal's digital platform is designed to accommodate rapid changes to its content or design to meet the emergent needs of courts and their users.

Challenges of Online Services

Online self-help resources offer a great opportunity to provide information and assistance 24/7 and 365 days a year. These online resources have proven critical during the pandemic as courts have worked to provide as many services as possible to those sheltering in place. Additionally, as a growing number of people become connected to the internet, many who need assistance from the courts' self-help centers will utilize these online tools. Nevertheless, there remain many others who have limited or no access to the internet.

> *"You can have the best website in the world, you can have all kinds of bells and whistles! If you don't have a staff member who is available to answer further questions, none of these are going to be effective."*
>
> *–Court Administrator Focus Group*

As of 2019, the Pew Research Center, which provides regular surveys of technology use in the United States, found the following:

[145] "Find Your Court Forms," *www.courts.ca.gov/forms.htm*.

[146] "Request a Fine Reduction," *https://mycitations.courts.ca.gov/interview?i=docassemble.jcc.abilitytopay%3Adata%2Fquestions%2Finterview.yml#page1*.

> Roughly three-in-ten adults with household incomes below $30,000 a year (29%) don't own a smartphone. More than four-in-ten don't have home broadband services (44%) or a traditional computer (46%). And a majority of lower-income Americans are not tablet owners. By comparison, each of these technologies is nearly ubiquitous among adults in households earning $100,000 or more a year.
>
> With fewer options for online access at their disposal, many lower-income Americans are relying more on smartphones. As of early 2019, 26% of adults living in households earning less than $30,000 a year are "smartphone-dependent" internet users—meaning they own a smartphone but do not have broadband internet at home.[147]

As courts move forward to extend services using technology, they must recognize there are still many litigants who will continue to need more traditional forms of remote services, such as landline phone service and U.S. mail, if they are to have access to justice.

Looking Forward

Remote services allow many litigants to access the self-help assistance they need without having to come to the courthouse. As technology improves and becomes less expensive, as more households cross the digital divide, and as the services offered by courts expand, online, remote, and other technology-based assistance will continue to grow and become perhaps the most common part of the service mix for self-help centers everywhere.

[147] Monica Anderson and Madhumitha Kumar, "Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption" (May 7, 2019) Pew Research Center, *www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/*.

CHAPTER 9: Document Assembly

VERY, VERY HELPFUL! This was an excellent, user friendly experience. Thank you!
–User of name change document assembly program on self-help website

"The silver lining to the pandemic, such as it is, is the way people are really using and getting used to using the Law Help Interactive programs. Honestly, it's the single most important tool in providing access to justice right now."
–Self-help center director

Self-help center services are far more beneficial to self-represented litigants if they result in complete, accurate, and properly filled-out court forms that allow litigants to take the next step in their cases. The process of assisting litigants to fill out court forms consumes a great deal of self-help center staff time. The document assembly service delivery method, developed and maintained in collaboration with the courts and the Judicial Council, makes the process of completing forms far more accurate, easier, and less stressful for self-represented litigants, and allows the litigant and the self-help center attorney to focus on the substance of the litigant's case and not the mechanics of forms completion. While self-help expansion funds did not directly fund the development of these programs, the expanded staff enabled a significant increase in the usage of document assembly forms packages by self-represented litigants.

Role of Court Forms in the Self-Help Process

Forms are key to providing litigants with the structure necessary to inform the court about their cases. Without forms, litigants would be required to prepare pleadings by researching the relevant law, identifying the information that must be provided to explain the elements of their cases, and drafting documents in a format approved by the court. Forms also allow for faster processing by court staff and judges who know precisely where to look for the relevant information.

Notwithstanding their benefits, filling out forms for court purposes is not necessarily easy or self-explanatory. In fact, reflecting the complexity of the law, a major challenge for self-represented litigants is contending with the number and complexity of the forms they are required to file and respond to in court cases

The Judicial Council maintains over 1,400 forms and translated forms that are used by courts, legal practitioners, litigants, and other court users to enforce rights, seek justice, and conduct court business. Forms were downloaded 201,591 times from the California Courts website during October 2019, which is an average of 6,503 downloads per day. Given the obvious demand, it is critical that the forms are maintained for legal accuracy, accessibility, and functionality. Forms are one of the council's most important digital services. The Judicial

Council is currently engaged in a project to ensure that forms meet basic standards of functionality by the end of the 2021–22 fiscal year.

Filing clerks review forms and accompanying documents to ensure that key elements are completed and that the documents are in order. They try to identify missing elements for litigants to answer and ensure that the documents can be filed. However, missing information or questions that are answered inaccurately due to lack of understanding are often only identified by the judge upon review. Depending on the seriousness of the error, the litigant may have to redo all of the forms and have the other side served again. This is a frustrating and time-consuming process for all. Thus, one of the most common and important services self-help centers provide is helping litigants thoroughly and accurately complete the forms needed for their cases.

This chapter describes a variety of approaches developed to help litigants prepare these critical court forms. Self-help centers made significant efforts through the self-help expansion to integrate document assembly into one-on-one services, workshops, and remote services in order to provide self-represented litigants with the key product they need to take the next steps in their cases.

Access to Judicial Council Forms

The Judicial Council forms used by self-represented litigants can be completed online, saved, and printed from the California Courts website. A recent enhancement to the "Find Your Court Forms" webpage on the California Courts website now links users with self-help content from the individual form pages, improving the experience and helping to ensure that litigants find important self-help information without needing to go to a self-help center.

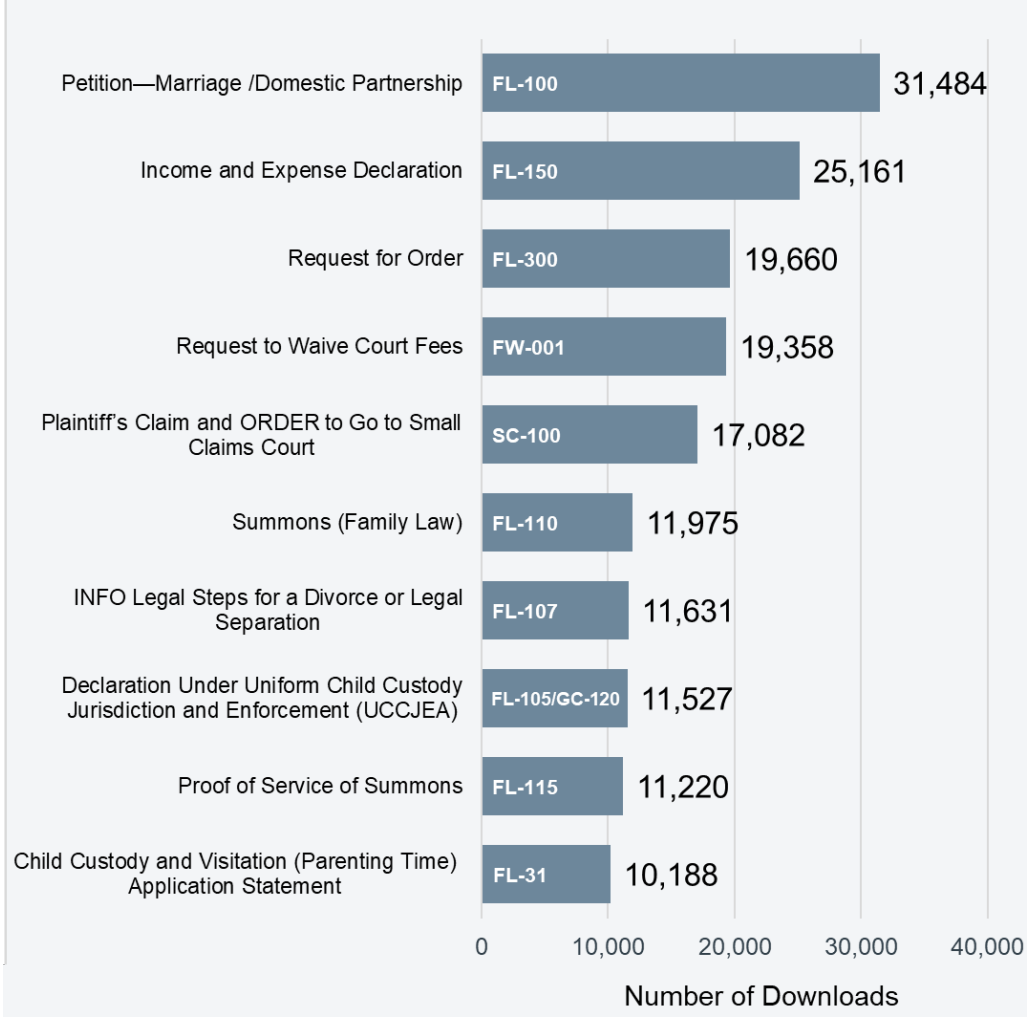
The Judicial Council process for developing forms is robust, and relies on the input of council staff, council members, and advisory committee members, as well as external stakeholders who are invited to provide comments on drafts of forms before they are finalized. After the forms are finalized and approved by the Judicial Council, an online fillable version is developed using specialized software. User experience features are then added that will assist litigants in completing the forms, such as allowing a litigant to enter information once and having that information prepopulate different parts of the form, and linking to other forms that are referred to in the form. The forms page on the California Courts website is the most visited page on the site, and forms are frequently downloaded—particularly those needed in areas of law with high numbers of self-represented litigants. Figure 29 shows the top 10 most downloaded forms (out of over 1,400 total forms). These 10 forms were downloaded 169,286 times in January 2020 alone.

PDF Form Sets

Self-help centers can assist litigants with PDF form sets with prepopulated information, such as the address of the court. The forms can be programmed so that information inserted onto one form, such as a child's name, can be automatically added to all linked forms. A cover sheet with questions can be created so that common information can be collected and inserted onto the form. These PDF form sets reduce the paperwork burden for self-represented litigants, reduce the

frustration caused by being required to enter or correct the same item of information at multiple places within a set of documents, and reduce the possibility of missed items or inconsistent responses.

Figure 29. Top 10 Downloaded Forms From "California Courts" Website in January 2020



Source: Judicial Council of California, Web Analytics, data as of June 2020.

Document Assembly Programs

Document assembly programs move beyond basic fillable forms and play an important role in self-help service delivery. These are programs developed by judicial branch attorneys and analysts that assist litigants in forms completion by providing a guided interview. As an example, popular personal tax preparation software packages walk taxpayers through easy-to-understand questions to fill out complex IRS and state tax forms "behind the scenes." In the court context, self-represented litigants can answer questions about themselves, the other party, and their cases, and the document assembly program will pull the information from their answers and fill out the forms necessary to complete the action. The forms will be completed properly, and they will be

in typeface. These document assembly programs are an invaluable resource for both one-on-one services and for workshop settings.

Self-help center staff report that online forms allow litigants to focus on the important aspects of the case and to stop worrying about filling out the forms. They call it "reducing litigant fatigue." Without this tool, workshop participants often have to write information by hand, rewriting their name, address, and case number multiple times. With the online forms, the litigant can enter the information once and that information is replicated throughout all necessary forms. Users do not see questions that do not apply to their situations and do not need to repeatedly input information, as is required when completing paper forms. This enables the self-help center staff and litigants to focus on the information required, as well as the background and contextual information they will need.[148] Centers have also found that when litigants have to write their names repeatedly, they often use a variation (such as adding or dropping a middle initial or adding a second last name), which causes problems when filing and may require forms to be redone.

Using document assembly programs with self-represented litigants can significantly increase the efficiency and effectiveness of self-help services. These programs are available online and so can be used remotely. A litigant can complete the online interview, print the forms, and then bring them into a self-help center for review and a discussion about the legal process. The programs allow litigants to answer the questions and save the answers to their own accounts, which are then accessible for subsequent interviews needed to complete a process. Litigants can also log into their accounts on self-help center computers, complete any missing information, print out the forms, and discuss the legal process with self-help center staff. Staff will then make the proper number of copies and compile the forms in the correct order for easy processing by the court clerk, or will assist litigants with electronic filing of their forms.

Document assembly programs can also be used in a hybrid format in which parts of the forms are intentionally left blank to be filled out by the litigant during a workshop that explains the legal concepts in more detail. For example, a divorce program might have the litigant or self-help center staff or volunteer complete full names for themselves, the other party, and the children of the marriage, and the date of the marriage, but leave the date of separation blank, as this can be a complicated legal determination best addressed after an educational session. The bulk of the form is typed, making it easier for court clerks and judicial officers to read and increasing the confidence of the litigant. Only the information filled out during the workshop is entered by hand. This approach has been used for years in large courts and works well for litigants and judicial officers.

[148] See Claudia Johnson, "Online Document Assembly Initiatives to Aid the Self-Represented," in *Innovations for Self-Represented Litigants*, Bonnie Rose Hough and Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, eds., pp. 97, 105–106 (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts 2011).

All of these streamlined processes, which conserve time and energy at the self-help center, translate into fewer obstacles and problems at the clerks' windows. (See Chapter 14 for further discussion of efficiencies.)

Judicial Branch Document Assembly Programs

While a variety of applications enable development of document assembly programs, two platforms are used extensively. These are LawHelp Interactive/HotDocs and Odyssey Guide & File (Tyler Technologies). Because of the complexity of document assembly program development and the difficulty of maintaining consistency for statewide forms, development is generally carried out by specialist analysts and attorneys at the Judicial Council.

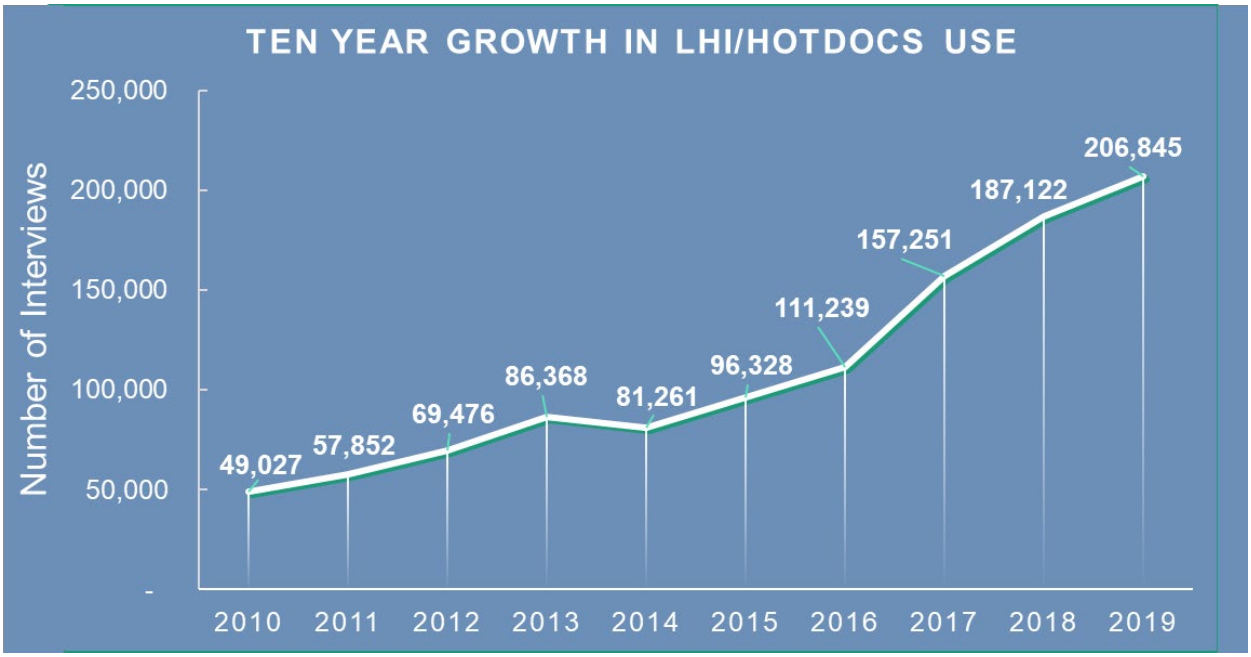
Self-Help Centers Using Document Assembly

As of June 30, 2020, 29 courts offer HotDocs and 26 courts offer Guide & File. Courts may use a combination of programs in different settings. For example, courts may use HotDocs in workshops, while links to Guide & File may be posted on the court's website. Most of the 17 courts that do not currently use document assembly programs are in small, rural counties.

LawHelp Interactive/HotDocs

The usage of HotDocs programs has steadily increased during the past 10 years as shown by the number of interviews in Figure 30. LawHelp Interactive (LHI) is an online portal for courts, legal aid programs, and litigants to access HotDocs programs. It is administered by a national nonprofit organization to provide low-income litigants with a user-friendly way to complete court documents.

Figure 30. Ten-Year Growth in LHI/HotDocs Use

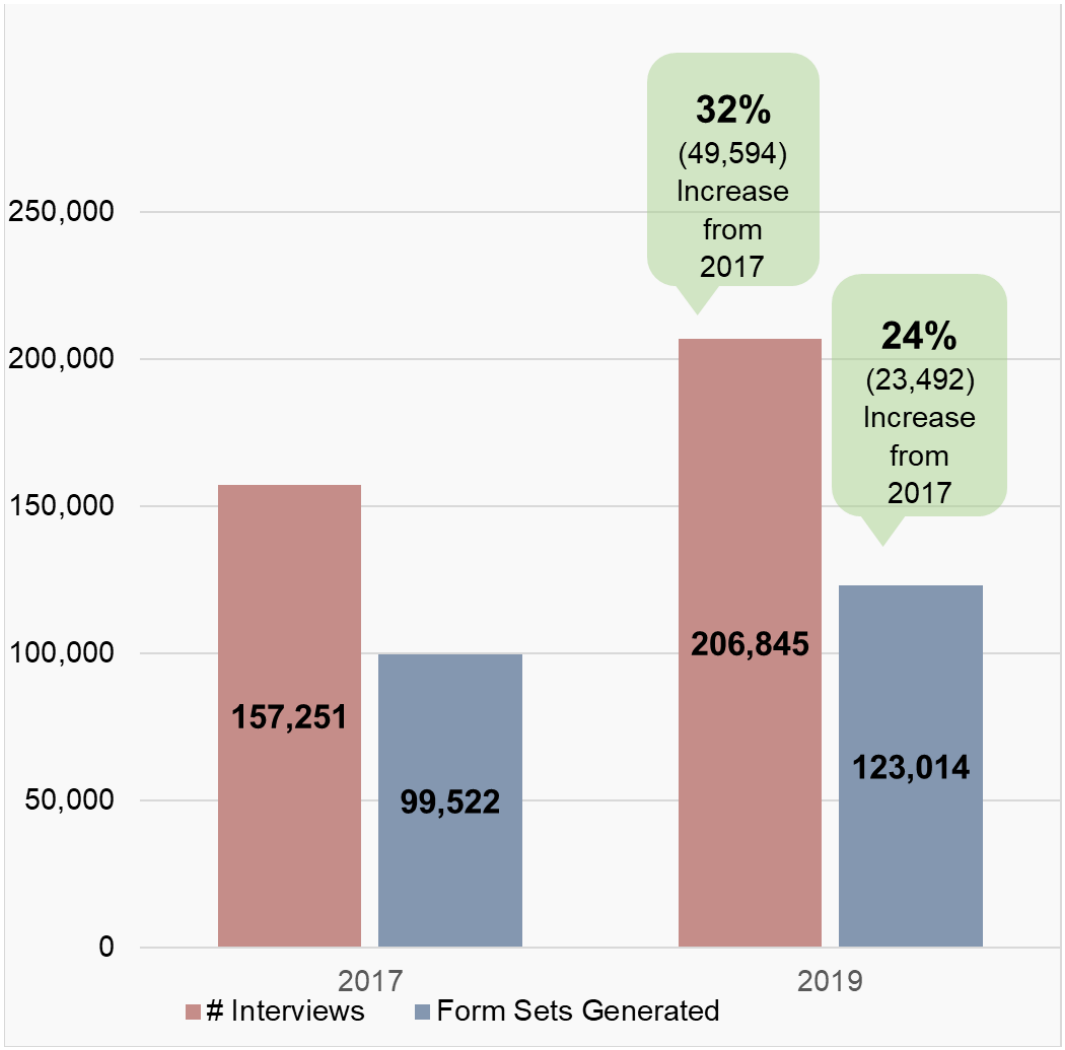


Source: Pro Bono Net, HotDocs Usage Report. See Table 22 in Appendix B for more information.

Early HotDocs programs were developed to support self-help centers so they could provide more efficient and effective services and, as such, were used primarily in large court workshop settings. However, usage is now common in medium-sized and even some small courts. Besides their use in workshops, courts make HotDocs available on publicly accessible computers at the courthouse and provide personal assistance while multiple litigants work on forms using computers in a classroom setting.

Self-help center staff track the number of HotDocs "interviews" that occur and the number of HotDocs form sets that are generated. Each user login is considered one interview. The number of interviews provides the project team with a measurement of overall usage. Some interviews include a triage program to help users determine whether the form set is appropriate for their situation. If not, no forms are generated. Other times, a person may start an interview, realize that they need additional information or more time, and save the interview and return later. The other measure is the number of form sets generated, which provides a measure of the number of users who reach the end of the program and successfully generate documents.

Figure 31. Change in Interviews and Form Sets Generated from Calendar Year 2017 to 2019



Source: Pro Bono Net, HotDocs Usage Report 2020. See Appendix B, Table 23.

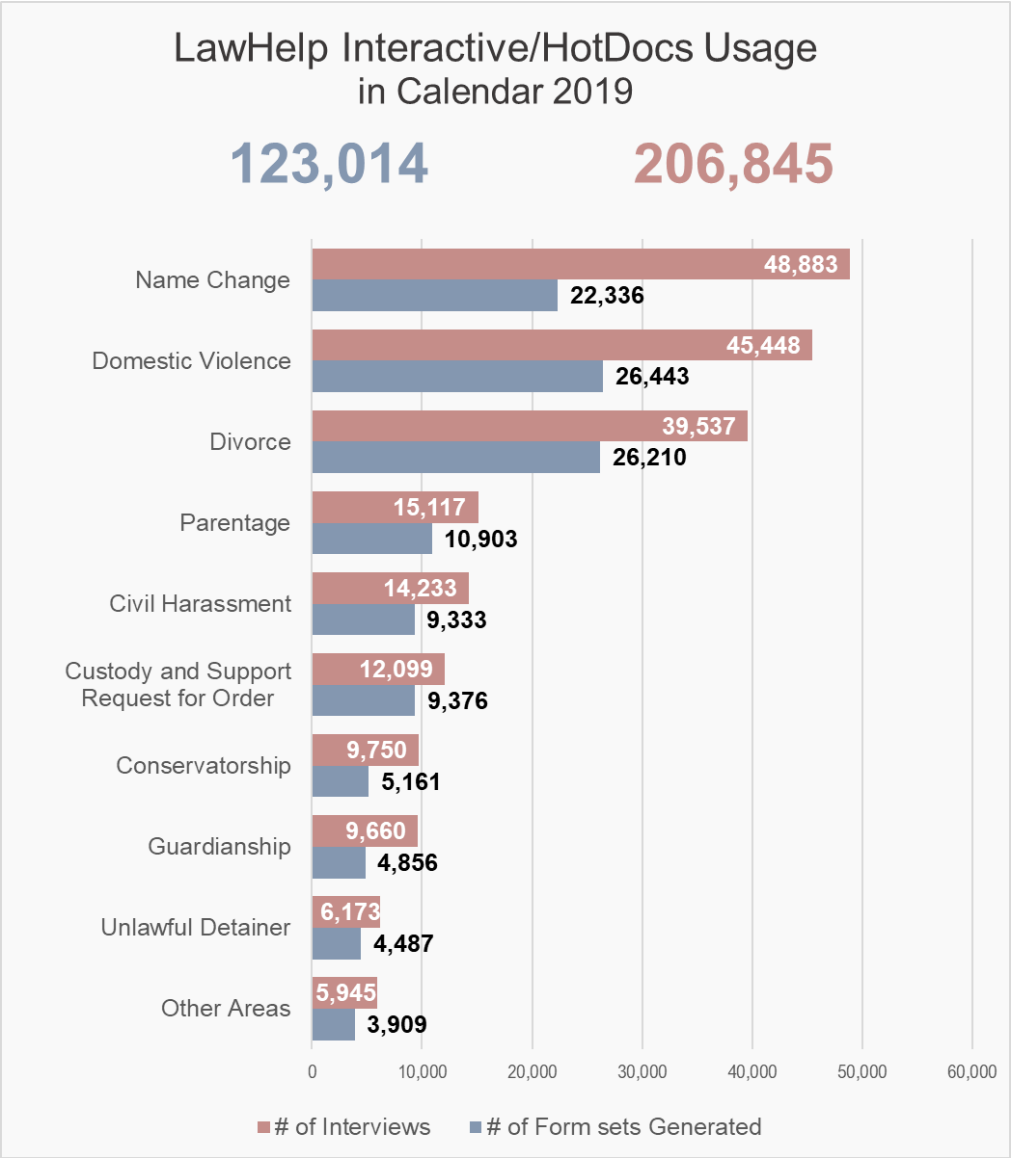
From 2017 to 2019, the number of interviews increased from 157,251 to 206,845 (a 32 percent increase), while the number of form sets generated increased from 99,522 to 123,014 (a 24 percent increase). LHI has developed an electronic filing module for HotDocs that is being piloted in the Superior Court of Los Angeles in landlord-tenant matters.

> *"We have computers in our centers and those proficient in English are encouraged to fill out the forms on HotDocs with staff working with them to answer any questions they may have. Those with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) are assisted by staff who can work directly with those litigants."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Director*

Usage of LHI/HotDocs increased when many courts joined the SHARP Tech Connect collaborative effort launched by the Superior Court of Butte County that was funded with innovations grant money. As stated previously, the project connects 22 courts remotely and allows litigants in one court's jurisdiction to attend workshops hosted in other courts using videoconferencing. The SHARP Tech Connect project also increased bandwidth at court sites where it was needed to enable videoconferencing. The project included delivery and setup of self-help computers and printers for the courts to offer document assembly programs to the public. Judicial Council staff assisted the SHARP courts by customizing LHI/HotDocs programs.

As shown in Figure 32, during 2019 courts used HotDocs to assist customers in the areas of family law, domestic violence, landlord-tenant, name change, civil harassment, and conservatorship and guardianship matters; 123,014 complete form sets were generated for litigants to file with the court. Each form set populated between 5 to 35 forms, including fee waiver and other forms that litigants may require.

Figure 32. LawHelp Interactive/HotDocs Usage in 2019



Source: LawHelp Interactive Resource Center National Usage Reports for Calendar Year 2019; Appendix B, Table 23.

There are 77 LHI/HotDocs programs customized for local court practices. These include local forms and procedures tailored to a county. In addition, following is the complete set of statewide modules available:

- Answer to Governmental Child Support
- Child Support Modification Request
- Civil Harassment Restraining Order Petition
- Civil Harassment Restraining Order Response

- Divorce Starter Kit Program
- Dissolution Petition and Disclosures
- Dissolution Foreign Service
- Domestic Violence Restraining Order Petition (no local notice)
- Domestic Violence Restraining Order Petition (with local notice)
- Domestic Violence Restraining Order Response
- Elder Abuse Restraining Order Petition
- Elder Abuse Restraining Order Response
- Guardianship Petition
- Fee Waiver Petition for Guardianship/Conservatorship Cases
- Name Change Petition
- Parentage Petition
- Parentage Response
- Petition for Custody and Support
- Request for Order
- Small Claims Triage
- Unlawful Detainer Complaint (for landlords)
- Unlawful Detainer Answer (for tenants)

Guide & File

Guide & File programs[149] are developed and managed by a consortium of California courts. The programs help court users fill out many popular legal forms that are filed in California's trial courts. California's Guide & File development began in 2015, and updates and enhancements are ongoing. From the outset, the programs were developed to be accessed online by self-represented litigants, so they include a wealth of educational information and many links to additional resources. Using Guide & File programming, the forms are not only easy to use and fill in, they can also be filed electronically if the litigant's court uses the Tyler Odyssey case management system and the court accepts electronic filing (e-filing) in that case type. While there is generally a convenience fee for e-filing, it can be waived for low-income litigants.

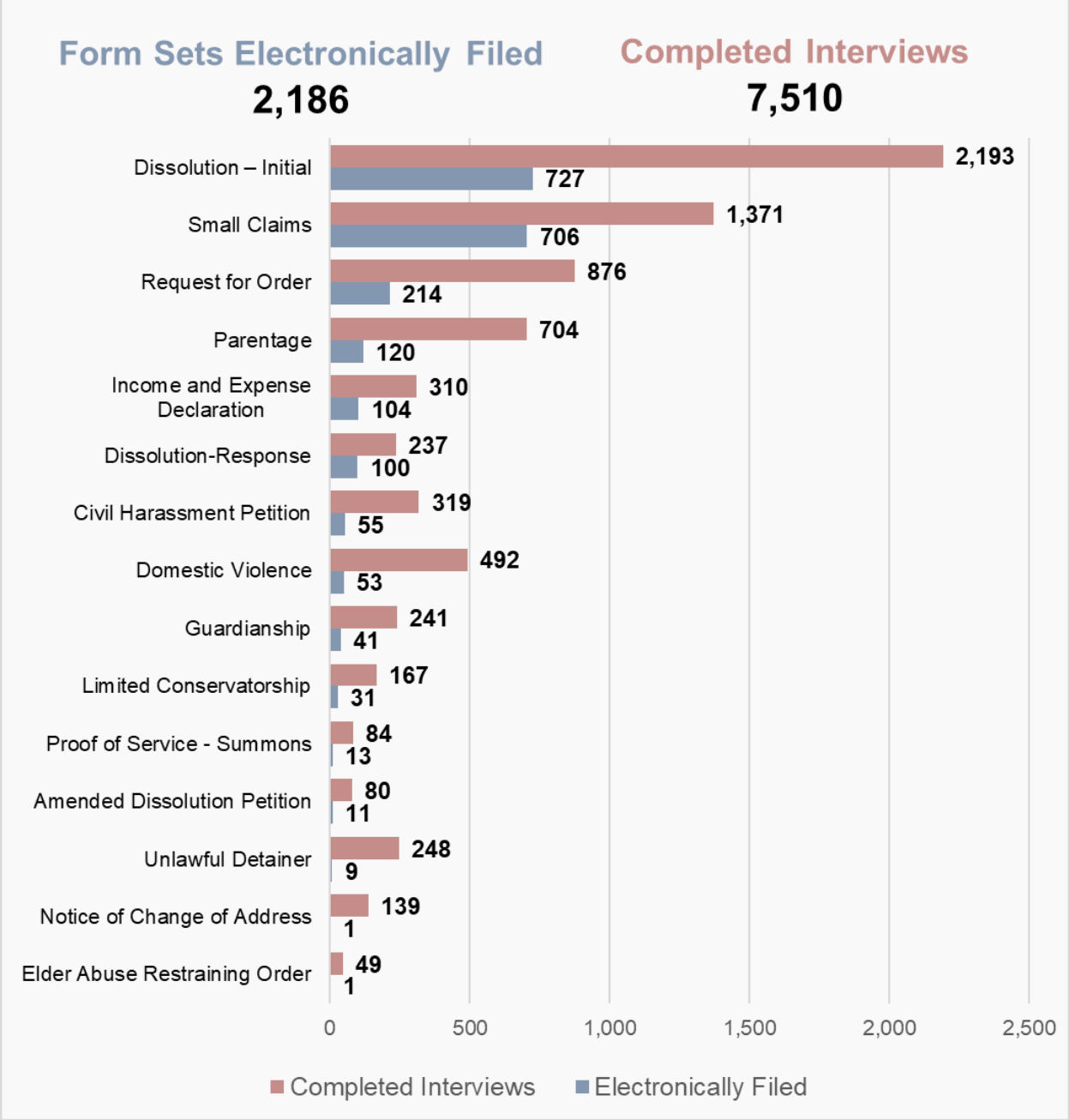
The following modules were available through Guide & File as of September 15, 2020:

- Divorce/Legal Separation/Nullity—Initial
- Divorce/Legal Separation/Nullity—Amended Petition
- Divorce/Legal Separation/Nullity—Response
- Proof of Service of Summons
- Request to Enter Default and Default Judgment
- Petition to Establish Parentage or Custody and Support
- Income & Expense Declaration
- Request for Order

[149] Available at *https://california.tylerhost.net/SRL*.

- Restraining Orders—Domestic Violence, Civil Harassment, Elder Abuse
- Eviction Answer
- Petition for Appointment of Guardian
- Petition for Appointment of Limited Conservatorship
- Small Claims
- Notice of Change of Address or Other Contact Information

Figure 33. Guide & File Completed Interviews and Form Sets Electronically Filed in 2019



Source: Guide & File Project. See Appendix B, Table 25.

Overall Impacts of Document Assembly Programs

Using document assembly programs greatly enhances the efficiency of self-help services. In one self-help program run by a legal aid program in partnership with the court, legal aid staff found

they could reduce the time volunteers spent preparing litigants' paperwork from as many as two to four hours down to 15 to 30 minutes:[150]

> To generate the necessary documents, a volunteer simply inputs the data gathered from our questionnaire. With a stroke of a key, the program populates and prints all the forms in the order required for filing. Now, instead of having to follow an eighteen-page memo to complete the forms, volunteers can complete the forms with very few instructions. Most complete all the forms in fifteen to thirty minutes with virtually no mistakes. Our fastest volunteer completed them all in just seven minutes. Not only did this program reduce the time required to complete the forms and therefore reduce the need for so many volunteers, it also increased accuracy so staff takes less time reviewing the forms. As we worked with the program, we saw that with few modifications, we could have the litigants prepare the pleadings themselves.[151]

One court attempted to document the time saved in using a HotDocs program to support their workshop. They found that the time spent in the workshop did not change but that it was much more comprehensive and helpful to the public.

> We used to spend a lot of the workshop saying "put your name and address here, and write your name and the other person's name there" on page after page. Once we started using HotDocs, all of that time was eliminated and people had typed, accurate information on each page. That allowed us to have time to explain more complicated issues like how to divide debts and potential pension rights—important issues I never had time to cover before. The papers looked much more professional and were easier to read—making the clerk and judge happy—but also making the litigant feel better about their paperwork.[152]

While it is difficult to isolate the impact of document assembly services given that it is used as part of a much larger framework of assistance, an evaluation of a document assembly program in Idaho published in 2010 may offer useful data:

> Clerks reported spending approximately 11.8 less minutes with the filers that came in with online forms. Judges reported that those who came in with online forms came better prepared to the hearings. In addition, clerks reported that those using the online forms were better prepared to present their cases to the judges and increased the amount of information shared with the court. In essence, the online guided interviews have an educational and confidence building effect on those without lawyers. Judges reported that they were making more informed

[150] Josh Passman and Phil Bertenthal, *Making Self-Help Work: Bet Tzedek's Conservatorship Clinic* (undated), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB_XXII_IIJ_2.pdf.

[151] *Ibid.*

[152] Interview with self-help center director.

> decisions in 35 percent of the cases that used the online forms. Clerks corroborated this by saying that the specificity of the orders had increased by about 25 percent for those cases using online forms.[153]

Document assembly has brought efficiency to the courts and enabled litigants to better advocate for themselves. Numerous document-assembly programs have been developed by judicial branch attorneys and staff, which ensures the highest quality and the ability to rapidly respond to court needs. The programs produce form sets that judges and clerks agree save them time and better prepare litigants for the next steps in their cases.

[153] Claudia Johnson, "Online Document Assembly Initiatives to Aid the Self-Represented," in *Innovations for Self-Represented Litigants*, Bonnie Rose Hough & Pamela Cardullo Ortiz, eds., pp. 97, 104–105 (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts 2011), citing R. Zorza, *Idaho Legal Aid Interactive Forms Evaluation* (Oct. 2010), *www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/Innovations%20for%20Self-Represented%20Litigants%20-%20Merged.pdf*.

CHAPTER 10: Settlement Services

Self-represented litigants often need help not only to get in the courthouse doors—but also to complete all steps to resolving their cases. Traditional negotiating methods such as asking the parties to "meet and confer" before a hearing seldom work well without assistance. Having a neutral person help the parties focus on the legal issues, encourage peaceful discussion, and suggest possible resolutions can be very helpful for self-represented litigants. With the increase in funding, self-help centers were able to significantly expand their services to help people resolve their cases without a hearing or trial. Settlement services saw a tenfold increase with new funding. These settlement services typically take more time than other services because they require allowing both sides to discuss the issues, providing information to help the parties make informed decisions, and helping them come to a solution that meets their respective needs. Settlement consultations generally require staff who are highly trained in both the law and alternative dispute resolution. In 2019, court self-help centers provided these more intensive settlement services 9,697 times. Prior to the funding augmentation, it is estimated that settlement assistance was provided by self-help centers in fewer than 1,000 cases per year.

Settlements are very common in civil and family law cases when the parties are represented by counsel, because attorneys are almost always directed to meet and confer toward settlement. But this is not the case with self-represented litigants who do not know civil procedure, who are likely antagonistic to the party they are suing or being sued by, and who may not have reasonable expectations. Self-help center staff can help with all of this and extend the savings that come from settlement to many self-represented litigants. This is not just a savings to the courts, but a significant advantage for the parties.

In focus groups of judicial officers, self-help center staff, and clerks, participants noted that settlement services save courtroom time, reduce future self-help center visits, and help parties resolve their issues amicably. (See Chapter 14 for a detailed discussion of the focus groups.) One participant said:

> I don't know how I could do my job without the services of the Self-Help Center in our jurisdiction because we have such high volume. I just think that services [they] are able to provide help us reduce the amount of cases meeting an actual hearing by probably 60 to 70%. On a normal law and motion calendar we can send self-represented litigants down to the clinic for basically a meet and confer. Now during the shelter in place that is done remotely, before that parties come to court. So they either resolve their matter and they get help drafting a stipulation at

> the self-help center or the parties come to court with a memo from self-help telling us what the issue is and it reduces maybe 10 issues to one that the judge has to rule on and then send them back to the order to be drafted.

Self-Help Centers Offering Settlement Services

In fiscal year 2017–18, only 9 self-help centers were offering settlement services. By the end of fiscal year 2018–19, 30 self-help centers had begun offering the services. In 2019, most of the 9,697 settlement services conducted were in the area of family law (89.5 percent), and 10.3 percent were for civil case types. Of the civil cases, 83.1 percent were for landlord-tenant cases and 12.5 percent were for civil harassment cases.[154]

Types of Settlement Services

Court self-help centers provide many types of settlement services, and the services vary from county to county. Settlement services include:

- Helping parties work out an agreement;
- Memorializing agreements between the parties by drafting them into enforceable orders and judgments that a judge can review and authorize;
- Assisting parties to memorialize judgments at case management conferences; and
- Assisting parties to resolve issues as they draft orders after hearing.

Settlement Services and Legal Information

Settlement services in a self-help center include providing legal information so the parties can make informed decisions. While mediation in civil cases has traditionally focused only on the process of helping parties come to an agreement, it is often critical for unrepresented people to understand their legal options in order to come up with an agreement that meets their needs and protects their rights.

In self-help settlement services related to an eviction, for example, unrepresented landlords and tenants will sit together with a self-help attorney who can provide legal information on different options and help them draft an agreement. Agreements may include selecting a specific date for the tenant to move out, with the promise that the tenant would leave the property in good condition in exchange for a waiver of back rent and a neutral credit reference. These agreements can benefit both sides and provide a broader opportunity for resolution of all matters.

> *"Frequently differences exist simply because one or more of the parties lacks understanding of the principles involved and providing general education materials on the points of misunderstanding allows resolution of many cases and issues by amicable agreement once this is accomplished."*
>
> *–Self-Help Attorney*

[154] Appendix B, Table 26.

In divorce cases, the self-help center attorney would be able to provide information on options for how to divide property, including potential consequences stemming from different divisions. (Note that self-help settlement services would be in addition to mandatory child custody mediation services, which help parents resolve issues about parenting time, and that by law must prioritize the safety and best interests of the children.[155]) With this information and the assistance of the self-help attorney, people can come to more informed and equitable agreements.

Effectiveness of Settlements

Self-help centers often provide settlement services in family law matters. Self-help center staff report that they can help parties reach a partial, if not full, agreement in over 50 percent of the cases in which settlement assistance is provided.[156]

Self-Help Settlement Programs

Courts have devised creative solutions for offering settlement services. Several programs are described below.

Judgments and One-Day Divorce

Several court self-help centers, including those in Sacramento, Los Angeles, and Marin Counties, help litigants finalize their divorces by providing settlement services and assistance with the paperwork so they can leave the courthouse with a complete, finalized divorce judgment. Settlement assistance may be provided by self-help center staff, judicial officers, or volunteer attorneys. Interested litigants are screened to determine if their cases are appropriate for this service. Staff then provide the litigants with introductory information and assist the parties with their final paperwork. These services have proven very helpful for cases where a response has been filed and thus the parties must reach an agreement or go to trial. There are several incentives for parties to use settlement services: the case will be finalized, the parties will be able to base their agreement on information about potential options, and they will be discussing the issues and reaching an agreement assisted by a neutral third person. These factors often lead to an agreement that can be entered as a judgment.

Stipulated Agreements

Court self-help centers assist self-represented litigants by drafting written agreements for them. These may be agreements that the parties have reached before coming to court, or agreements they reached upon learning more about the process while receiving settlement assistance at the court. Judicial officers often help guide self-represented litigants to general agreements but may not have the time to walk the parties through all of the particulars; that is where self-help center staff come in, helping turn agreements into a written stipulation. As the staff works with the litigants to prepare the written stipulation, they ensure that critical items are addressed and that the parties understand what the terms mean. Assisting litigants to reach an agreement, then

[155] Cal. Rules of Court, rule 5.210.

[156] Self-help center focus groups, June–July 2020; see Chapter 14 for further description.

helping them memorialize that agreement in writing and having a judge review and approve it so that it becomes a court order, reduces the likelihood that the litigation will continue. This saves the parties time and money, reduces present and possibly future conflicts between the parties, and uses the court's time most efficiently.

Day-of-Court Mediation

Several courts have their self-help center staff appear at calendars that primarily serve self-represented litigants. At those hearings, court staff assist parties in resolving their issues through mediation. In some courts, the judge sends the parties to the self-help center to receive the services. In other courts, self-help center staff provide these services just outside the courtroom. In many cases, the parties reach an agreement that can be presented to the judge that same day. Even when the parties do not reach full agreement, however, courts agree that such services help the parties narrow the issues of contention. The settlement staff can then provide the parties with a memo for the judge that identifies the issues that remain in dispute. This allows the judge to focus on those concerns and help the parties get a decision—often that same day.[157]

Family-Centered Case Resolution Conferences

Self-help staff are a valuable element in what the Family Code refers to as "family-centered case resolution conferences," more commonly referred to as "status conferences," that involve self-represented litigants. Until 2012, the Family Code prohibited status conferences in family law absent a stipulation by both parties due to a concern that encouraging parties to finish their cases would inhibit opportunities for reconciliation. Over the preceding years, self-help centers had discovered that this prohibition on case management led to thousands of cases never being finalized, and, as an unintended consequence, parties were committing unintentional bigamy by remarrying on the assumption that they were divorced. In response, the Elkins Family Law Task Force recommended that the statute be amended,[158] and the Legislature passed Assembly Bill 939 (Stats. 2010, ch. 352), which changed the code section and required the Judicial Council to adopt a rule implementing family-centered case resolution.[159]

These status conferences are an excellent vehicle for identifying those self-represented litigants who will likely succeed in resolving their cases with assistance from the self-help center. Models of settlement assistance vary from court to court; in some courts, judges meet with self-represented litigants and have self-help center staff assist with settlement discussions. Once the agreement is reached, the parties are referred to the self-help center so the paperwork can be completed as soon as possible. In other courts, self-help staff have prepared the judgment paperwork in advance of the conference, thereby identifying issues for the judge to resolve with the litigants. By setting regular checkpoints with litigants in family law cases, courts can ensure that they are providing settlement support throughout the case. If the couple has reconciled, the

[157] Self-help center focus groups, June–July 2020.

[158] Judicial Council of Cal., *Elkins Family Law Task Force: Final Report and Recommendations* (Mar. 18, 2010), pp. 22–28, *www.courts.ca.gov/documents/20100423itemj.pdf*.

[159] See Cal. Rules of Court, rule 5.83.

case can be dismissed. With these court interventions and supportive services, there is no reason for divorces to linger simply because the parties do not realize there is another step in the process.

Process for Settlement

As settlement services expanded in 2019, courts learned more about resources that need to be in place for a settlement program to be successful.

Staffing

Settlement services often require more experienced staff. Successful mediators are professionals who understand not only the legal issues but also alternative dispute resolution techniques. Many self-help center staff have had training in mediation, and some included mediation as part of their private law practices before joining the court. The Judicial Council has also offered several courses for self-help attorneys on mediation skills at its annual trainings.

A short divorce story with a happy ending: Both parties came to the self-help center to seek help with their divorce. They believed they could not get a divorce because neither of them committed any "bad act"; their relationship had just changed and they no longer desired to be married. They had children and some property to divide.

Upon meeting with self-help staff, both parties were elated and relieved to find out that they could work together to dissolve the marriage and work out parenting plans, support issues, and property division. Self-help staff helped them to get an appointment with Family Court Services mediators where they worked out their parenting plan. Then they returned to the self-help center and staff helped them to work through child and spousal support issues by helping them to run support calculator programs. After they identified their community and separate property and agreed upon values, self-help center staff helped them to craft a stipulated judgment.

Later, both parties sent cards to the self-help center thanking them for helping them to easily resolve their issues without needing to fight in court.
–Self-Help Center Director

Agreements

Standard forms for settlement agreements to ensure that the agreements are properly and thoroughly recorded are essential for the self-help center's program. If the parties reached an agreement in the courtroom, staff help them work out the details and write it down. As staff prepares the agreement, they can identify and help the parties discuss these additional terms so that they can have a more comprehensive agreement—and have less need to return to court to resolve those additional issues. Staff take the time to review the details with the parties so everyone understands what was written down, and what is the agreement.

> *"Reaching an agreement allows the parties to leave the courthouse without the stress, anger and frustration that comes with a contested hearing. We hope that this leads to increased compliance and improvement of conditions for the parties and their children. Each staff member has completed at least one 40-hour mediation course, and periodic training classes on trauma-informed service delivery and cultural literacy. Staff new to the office will have to observe and be observed before they are allowed to conduct conflict resolution sessions independently."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Attorney*

If both parties are in court for a hearing or status conference in family law, courts may try to afford the parties an opportunity to settle as much of the case as possible, saving the parties the time, expense, and stress of a continuing lawsuit, and increasing the efficiency of the court process. The Superior Court of Riverside County, for example, developed a triage program for parties appearing for family law hearings. On the same day as their hearings, triage customers are able to have mediation, meet with child support services, and receive assistance from self-help staff to finalize their cases.

Partnerships and Use of Technology

Supporting other mediation services in landlord-tenant and small claims

While not included in the numbers of settlement services reported above, self-help center directors are often involved in coordinating with other community partners, such as legal aid, the Better Business Bureau, and nonprofit mediation services, to provide additional mediation services, particularly in landlord-tenant and small claims areas. These case types tend to need less self-help support because the issues are limited. If parties can resolve those few issues, the resolution can be documented with a short, written agreement and no additional forms, and then presented to the judge. In this scenario, the role of the self-help center is more to provide information about the process and what the court needs to enter a judgment. It is often the outside agency that provides the mediation services and that prepares the short agreement or judgment.

Collaborating with Family Court Services mediation

California has provided mandatory mediation in disputed child custody cases for nearly 40 years.[160] Self-help centers generally work closely with those Family Court Services programs—

[160] Former Civ. Code, § 4607 (1981), now Fam. Code, § 3170.

and, in smaller courts, self-help staff may also be the mediator. Self-help centers prepare parties for custody mediation by explaining the law, court procedures, and the mediation process in the county. Many have developed streamlined procedures to ensure that if the parties reach agreement, that agreement can be written up and submitted for approval without delay.

Using pro bono assistance

Many settlement models supported by self-help centers incorporate experienced volunteer attorneys to provide mediation services and may use trained volunteer law students or paralegals under the attorney's supervision to assist with preparing the paperwork. While it may be difficult to find pro bono assistance for family law cases that may last for many years, providing assistance for an afternoon to help parties come to an agreement can be a very positive, short-term volunteer opportunity.

Online dispute resolution

Some courts are piloting online dispute resolution (ODR) services.[161] ODR is "an online process in which the parties themselves, or with the assistance of a neutral human or machine third party, resolve their issues to the parties' mutual satisfaction."[162] This is an emerging service, and few people have utilized these services in California as of June 2020. However, indications from pilot projects in other jurisdictions suggest that ODR may provide new opportunities for the public to resolve some cases.[163] Judicial Council staff are watching this emerging sector, and participating court self-help centers are providing feedback. This analysis will be essential for understanding and publicizing these courts' results and identifying the benefits and challenges that self-represented litigants face using ODR so that the services can be improved as appropriate.

Looking Forward

The expansion of self-help centers into more complicated areas of family law such as settlement, while time-consuming for the self-help center staff, saves time and stress for the parties and creates efficiencies for the courts. It is difficult to overestimate the stress on the parties of a protracted divorce or a dispute over children. Court-based settlement services also help the court by shortening, if not eliminating, hearings and trials. By helping self-represented litigants develop reasonable expectations about their cases and encouraging them to consider a variety of options, self-help centers help the parties to develop more equitable solutions that meet their needs. By helping the parties write their formal agreements and prepare the final paperwork,

[161] Los Angeles, Merced, Orange, Santa Clara, and Yolo Counties.

[162] Michigan Supreme Court, State Court Administrators Office, Office of Dispute Resolution, *Considerations in Implementing Court ODR Systems*, p. 1 (Jan. 6, 2020).

[163] Joint Technology Committee (Conference of State Court Administrators, National Association for Court Management, and National Center for State Courts), "Case Studies in ODR for Courts Version 2.0," *JTC Resource Bulletin* (adopted 28 Jan. 2020), *www.ncsc.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/16517/2020-01-28-odr-case-studies-v2-final.pdf*.

self-help staff help to ensure that a case can be finalized efficiently, and that litigants can leave the court and move on with their lives.[164]

[164] Self-help center focus groups, June–July 2020.

CHAPTER 11: Self-Help Services in Rural Courts

"As a judge whose court serves a large rural area, I am keenly aware of the importance of having self-help centers available to help low-income rural families facing critical life issues. These self-help centers are a key part of the solution to the rural justice gap."
–Justice Ron Robie, Court of Appeal, Third Appellate District

Rural courts encounter critical challenges when trying to deliver self-help services. Lack of transportation combined with the need to travel great distances to access court services, sometimes over difficult and weather-dependent terrain, exacerbates the difficulty of providing services in already chronically underserved communities with few resources. Rural counties are less likely to have local bar associations, legal services programs, or robust pro bono attorney programs.[165]

Given the lack of a strong legal services delivery system, court-based self-help centers are particularly critical in rural areas. The challenge faced by rural self-help centers during the program expansion was to implement innovations and develop new solutions to ensure that self-represented litigants in rural areas can access high-quality assistance for their legal problems.

As noted by the California Commission on Access to Justice, "[b]ecause rural courts are often the first place individuals go when they encounter legal problems and do not know where else to turn, it is vitally important that all rural courts and their self-help centers be considered part of the broader delivery system."[166] The Judicial Council has worked to ensure that self-help services are a core function of every court in California so that all courts are able to provide self-help assistance. Self-help centers provided assistance 244,648 times in 2019 in 36 of the 37 counties whose courts are designated as small in the trial court funding formula.[167] (The Superior Court of Alpine County does not report data; thus, this chapter refers to the 36 reporting courts.) This represents 24 percent of all brief and extended services statewide.[168]

---

[165] California Commission on Access to Justice, *California's Attorney Deserts: Access to Justice Implications of the Rural Lawyer Shortage* (July 2019), www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/Attorney-Desert-Policy-Brief.pdf.

[166] California Commission on Access to Justice, *Improving Civil Justice in Rural California* (Sept. 2010), p. 12, www.calbar.ca.gov/Portals/0/documents/accessJustice/CCAJ_2010__FINAL_2.pdf?ver=2017-05-19-133105-073.

[167] "The Trial Court Funding Formula, Explained," news release July 27, 2017, *California Courts Newsroom*, https://newsroom.courts.ca.gov/news/trial-court-funding-formula-explained; Judicial Council of Cal., *Trial Court Budget Working Group: Recommendation of New Budget Development and Allocation Methodology* (Apr. 24, 2013), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/jc-20130426-itemP.pdf.

[168] Appendix B, Table 28.

Issues Common to Court-Based Self-Help Centers in Rural Counties

Small Budgets

To provide a baseline level of services in all counties, the Judicial Council adopted a funding model to provide $34,000 in self-help funding for each court, with the remainder of self-help dollars being distributed by population. Coupled with family law facilitator funding, this was intended to provide a base level of funding for a self-help attorney. However, these two sources alone do not allow for a full-time self-help attorney in the smallest courts.

Assistance Limitations

Self-help services in courts serving rural communities differ in many ways from those offered in urban courts. Physically, rural and older courthouses tend to be smaller, which can make it challenging to find sufficient space for self-help services in the courthouse. There are also significantly fewer people seeking assistance. Many small-court self-help center staff work part time on self-help, serving in other capacities for the court. For example, the same person often serves as both the self-help center attorney and the family law facilitator. This same person may also be the small claims advisor and sometimes the Family Court Services mediator.

Shortage of Qualified Attorneys to Serve

The financial challenges faced by rural courts are exacerbated by the lack of available attorneys in rural California.[169] Studies have found that there are many reasons attorneys choose to not practice law in rural areas, including lack of other attorneys for support and community, unwillingness to leave urban amenities and culture, concerns about a spouse's/partner's opportunities for work, and relatively low wages coupled with significant law school debt.[170]

Because of this dearth of attorneys, one of the biggest challenges to courts in rural settings is finding a qualified attorney at the level of funding available. Complicating matters, because of the importance of maintaining the neutrality of the court, serving as a self-help attorney generally precludes the attorney from maintaining a private practice where they might appear in front of the court that employs them. Moreover, it would be extremely difficult for a litigant to trust the assistance of a self-help attorney who turns out to be representing the opposing party. While some courts have allowed contract attorneys to practice in different counties or handle case types such as death penalty matters that would not be coming to the self-help center, such ethical concerns make it difficult for a part-time attorney to make a living.

Many communities are so small that there are few options for affordable legal representation. So, for example, if a legal services attorney assists one party to a case, the other party may not be

---

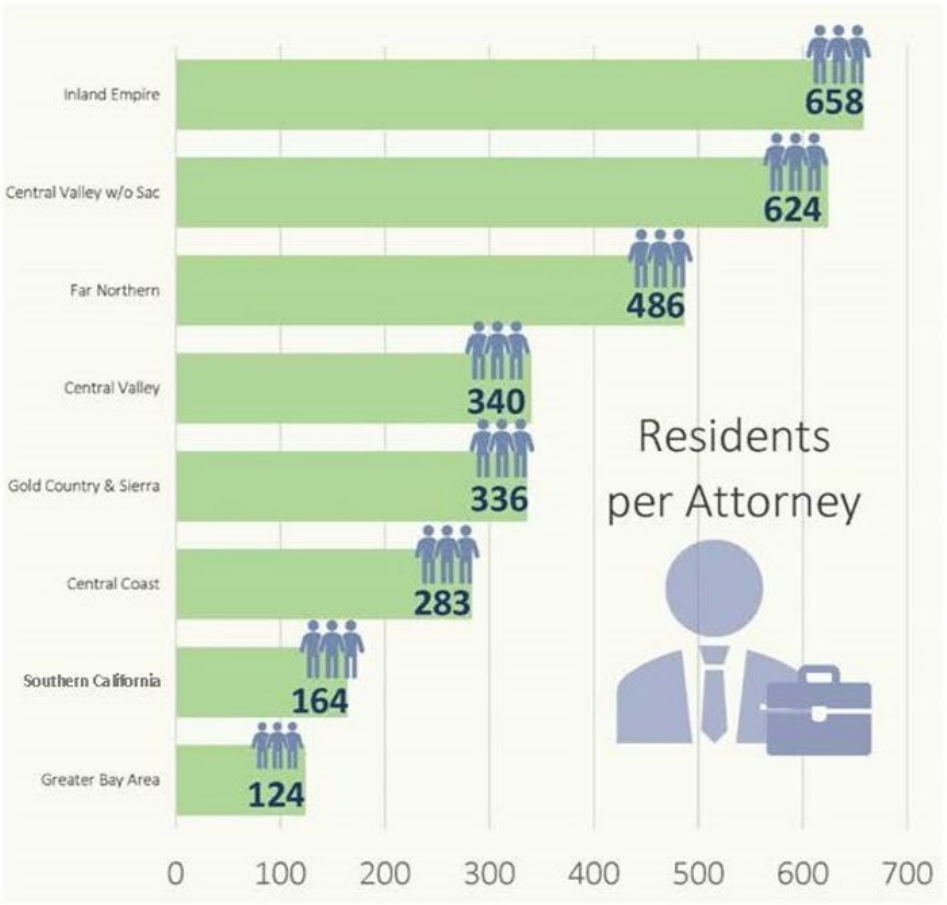
[169] Ethan Bronner, "No Lawyer for Miles, So One Rural State Offers Pay" (Apr. 8, 2013) *New York Times*; Lisa R. Pruitt et al., "Legal Deserts: A Multi-State Perspective on Rural Access to Justice" (2018) 12 *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 15, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3198411; *California's Attorney Deserts, supra* note 165.

[170] Lisa R. Pruitt & Bradley E. Showman, "Law Stretched Thin: Access to Justice in Rural America" (Aug. 2014) 59 *South Dakota Law Review* 466, 521; *California's Attorney Deserts, supra* note 165, at p. 9.

able to find help.[171] This lack of legal representation makes the role of the court self-help center all the more valuable. However, self-help attorneys cannot provide representation or legal advice, but rather assist in preparation of legal documents and provide information about the court process.

Providing Self-Help Services in Rural Communities

Figure 34. Residents per Attorney



Source: California Commission on Access to Justice, California's Attorney Deserts: Access to Justice Implications of the Rural Lawyer Shortage *(July 2019), Table 1.*

As demonstrated in this chart prepared by the California Commission on Access to Justice (Figure 34), California's rural communities are often "attorney deserts" where residents must drive many miles to reach an attorney who can represent them. Many parts of California lack

[171] *Ibid.*

sufficient numbers of attorneys to serve their populations, a situation that is particularly acute in many rural areas.[172]

Legal services agencies also have fewer resources per capita in rural areas than urban areas.[173] These limited resources are compounded by distance and geography.[174] The few legal services organizations that provide assistance in rural areas mostly work in multiple counties; they can neither afford to have a physical location in every county, nor can they visit every county every day.

Few Outside Agencies for Referrals or Law Firms Taking Pro Bono Clients

Urban county court self-help centers are usually swamped with litigants needing services. Self-help center staff in these courts have the advantage of being able to refer some of these individuals to local legal services agencies and pro bono resources for additional assistance.[175] Compounding the need for, and value of, court self-help services in rural communities is the likely absence of a robust nonprofit social services network like those found in urban communities.[176] For example, a small community may have a domestic violence prevention service provider, but there may not also be any substance abuse services, or mental health services, or renters' assistance programs.

As set forth in the *Guidelines for the Operation of Self-Help Centers in California Trial Courts*,[177] self-help centers are encouraged to develop referral relationships with their local legal aid society and other community-based legal and social service providers. Rural court self-help centers have very limited referral options available. To meet the needs in their community, self-help center staff often must provide more in-depth services on a wider variety of legal issues than their urban court counterparts because they may likely be the sole source of assistance in their area. The rural self-help attorney is often like the country doctor who works to address as many needs as possible for their community.

Geography and Technology

Many of California's rural counties are large, covering thousands of square miles. Because the populations in rural counties tend to be spread out, there is historically inadequate public transportation to support the self-represented litigant who needs to get from one part of the

---

[172] *California's Attorney Deserts, supra* note 165, at p. 2.

[173] 13 *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 15 (2018) (data on mixed rural/urban counties not available for 2015).

[174] Legal Services Corporation, *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-income Americans* (2017), p. 48, www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-FullReport.pdf; see, e.g., ABA Standing Committee on Pro Bono and Public Service and Center for Pro Bono, *Rural Pro Bono Delivery: A Guide to Pro Bono Legal Services in Rural Areas* (2003).

[175] *Improving Civil Justice in Rural California, supra* note 166, at pp. 42–44.

[176] *Id.* at p. 35.

[177] Judicial Council of Cal., *Guidelines for the Operation of Self-Help Centers in California Trial Courts* (Feb. 2011), www.courts.ca.gov/documents/self_help_center_guidelines.pdf.

county to another to access help from the self-help center. This lack of transit becomes even more challenging if the litigant must then travel to another part of town or the county to have the sheriff serve papers or to file their paperwork. Limited budgets often mean that self-help staff are not full time, so the centers may have limited service hours, making the lack of public transit even more problematic.[178]

Common Needs of Rural Litigants

While rural residents come to self-help centers with roughly the same number of legal issues as residents of urban communities, rural centers must address the different demographics of rural communities. The California Commission on Access to Justice study found that a larger percentage of rural Californians are elderly, more rural Californians are disabled, a larger percentage of rural residents are low income, and a smaller percentage of rural Californians are college educated.[179] Additionally, there are increasing issues with litigants of limited English proficiency[180] who are new to, and increasing in, rural areas.

An issue that is more particular to small communities is the need for, and the challenges associated with, privacy and confidentiality in rural settings. When most people in town know each other, it is much easier for private matters to become public without the utmost care.[181] As a result, litigants are less likely to be comfortable in a workshop where their legal issues may be hard to shield from other participants.[182] Even being seen at a service agency or the court self-help center could create difficulties for individuals in rural communities; it is far too easy in a small town to recognize a neighbor's car at the clinic, or run into them in the courthouse building. While there are potentially more explanations for being at a courthouse than seeking self-help services, for someone seeking to escape a violent relationship, such a sighting could prove to be disastrous.

Traditional Service Delivery Models in Rural Courts

The most common service delivery model used in small, rural court self-help centers is the traditional one-on-one, face-to face consultation. Ninety-two percent of all customer encounters in rural courts are held in person (compared to 83 percent of extended encounters in non-rural courts). Attorneys in smaller courts often find that they have to become knowledgeable in a broad array of legal areas that, in a larger court, would be handled by specialists or could be referred to other legal services.

---

[178] *Improving Civil Justice in Rural California* at p. 33 (citing Housing Assistance Council, *Rural Seniors and Their Homes* (2004), p. 15, www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/ruralseniors.pdf).

[179] California Commission on Access to Justice, *California's Attorney Deserts: Access to Justice Implications of the Rural Lawyer Shortage* (July 2019), at p. 27.

[180] *Improving Civil Justice in Rural California,* at p. 21.

[181] Donald D. Landon, *Country Lawyers: The Impact of Context on Professional Practice* (1990); Ethan Bronner, "No Lawyer for Miles, So One Rural State Offers Pay" (Apr. 8, 2013) *New York Times*.

[182] Focus group on rural self-help issues, June 2020.

Technology limitations are also a major problem in more remote parts of the state. In many rural communities, there is limited access to the internet, limited wireless service, and limited bandwidth in general. This not only affects individuals who have trouble accessing or relying on online services; lack of connectivity impacts court operations as well, often limiting their ability to rely on technology. This lack of access to computers and the internet is particularly pronounced in rural communities.[183]

Among the challenges smaller courts face are the challenges of providing extensive customer support that relies on technology, both in the court and at the individual's home. While larger courts have their own information technology divisions, small courts are more likely to rely on the services of a contractor who visits the court periodically or is on call. Thus, the self-help center attorney may have to address many technological challenges without staff support, which can affect their ability to provide online services.

Adopting Technology in Rural Self-Help Services

SHARP Tech Connect

California's small courts have taken large strides to introduce technology solutions to address common challenges. The Judicial Council's Court Innovations Grant Program has encouraged courts to develop new solutions to delivering services that could be shared throughout California's courts. As referenced previously, the SHARP Tech Connect program led by the Superior Court of Butte County is one such project that has created a technology collaborative involving 22 rural courts. The project built on an existing four-court collaboration; it used the grant funding to expand bandwidth (critical for many participating courts), provide self-help computers, and develop workshops that are available via videoconference technology.

SHARP Tech Connect allows courts to collaborate more efficiently, and to offer more reliable technology-based services. While it is seldom practical for a court in a small county to hold their own workshop, by banding together, one court in the consortium can provide a workshop that is available via videoconference to any of the connected sites. When the Superior Court of Shasta County offers an introductory dissolution workshop, anyone coming into one of the other 22 centers can join in. They are provided with the forms to be completed and can engage in the interactive workshop with people from other counties. When the online workshop is done, the individual can have their papers reviewed by the self-help attorney for completeness and to address any local form and filing instructions. While that individual is participating in the workshop, the self-help attorney is available to serve litigants with other issues. Participating centers can rely on each other to develop educational content, with each court contributing their

[183] California Commission on Access to Justice, "The Role of Technology in Enhancing Rural Access to Justice" (June 2020), Part IV of the Rural Justice Policy Paper Series, p. 7, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3633522, citing Monica Anderson and Madhumitha Kumar, *supra* note 147; Andrew Perrin, "Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists" (May 31, 2019) Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/; Housing Assistance Council, "Snapshots of Rural Data," www.ruralhome.org/sct-information/maps/1591.

expertise. Litigants get the benefit of the workshop as well as the follow-up one-on-one review and information on local practices.[184]

In addition to providing workshop materials, broadband access, and computer equipment to partner courts, the SHARP Tech Connect program also created a website, *www.sharpcourts.org*, that provides an online platform for participating courts and self-represented litigants. Among other features, the site houses document assembly programs so self-represented litigants can access them from home or from one of the participating court self-help centers.

This multi-court model program also enables the sharing of bilingual resources and staff with specialized skills. Self-help center staff in one SHARP Tech Connect court can easily videoconference with a staff member in a partner court who can provide language interpretation services or answer specialized questions.

Enhanced broadband access has also enabled the courts to expand their use of document assembly programs (see Chapter 8). The document assembly modules used by the SHARP Tech Connect counties include the following:

- Civil Harassment Prevention (both Petition and Response packages)
- Divorce Petitions and Disclosures
- Divorce "Starter Kit"
- Domestic Violence Prevention Program (both Petition and Response packages)
- Elder Abuse Prevention (both Petition and Response packages)
- Guardianship Petition and Fee Waiver for Guardianship
- Request for Order in Family Law
- Name Change
- Parentage (both Petition and Response packages)
- Request for Order in Family Law
- Small Claims

Providing Computer Access in Outlying Areas

Other courts collaborate with agencies in their communities to set up computers in public places such as libraries and community centers: "For example, one computer was deployed to Tecopa, California, a tiny community in Death Valley, four hours from the Inyo County courthouse in Bishop. Other computers were set up in Covelo, a remote town in Mendocino County, and Winterhaven, in far southeastern Imperial County."[185] This allows people to get assistance from self-help centers without having to travel to the court.

[184] Appendix B, Table 16.

[185] California Commission on Access to Justice, "The Role of Technology in Enhancing Rural Access to Justice" (June 2020), Part IV of the Rural Justice Policy Paper Series, p. 20.

The Fresno court has placed computers at police stations, a domestic violence shelter, and community agencies in different parts of the county. This allows court-based attorneys to have videoconference meetings with litigants who cannot come to the courthouse and enables self-help staff and litigants to view the same screen so that the self-help attorney can help litigants complete their court forms.

Modified Clinic Model

Self-help centers may employ a modified clinic model wherein staff help a few litigants at a time, each addressing unique legal topics. As the first litigant starts on their paperwork, the attorney consults with the second litigant and possibly a third, circling back to make sure that everyone's questions are answered. In this modified approach, the self-help attorney can answer questions and help multiple litigants through paperwork and on to their next steps, without the formality of a workshop or the limitations of working with one person at a time. For simplicity in data collection, the modified clinic model is still considered a one-on-one service. This approach can be very helpful when there are not enough people for a workshop.

Impact of Self-Help Centers on Smaller Courts

The SHARP Tech Connect project and other efforts have developed creative solutions to the problems of access to self-help services in small courts. Computers with access to self-help services have been placed in self-help centers and community centers. Courts too small to offer workshops can link litigants through videoconferencing for workshops and provide access to document assembly. And courts with part-time self-help center staff can use videoconferencing to link litigants both to bilingual staff and attorneys with specialized expertise in other courts.

Due to their small size, rural courts can be more proactive in reaching out to litigants who might benefit from the assistance of the self-help center. In one court, program staff review the family law case management calendar a month before the status conference and identify cases that may qualify for a default judgment. Staff contact the litigants to ask if they would like assistance with the paperwork to complete the divorce. Litigants can make an appointment at their convenience and finish their cases without needing to appear before a judge.

By minimizing the risk of rejected pleadings and court appearances that have to be continued due to procedural problems, self-help services are particularly helpful for litigants who have to travel far distances to the courts and have limited public transportation options.

Likewise, with limited mediation services or other community support to help litigants settle cases, self-help centers are particularly helpful in assisting litigants to reach and memorialize agreements. Where an agreement is not possible, the self-help center can provide more extensive support as the litigant prepares for trial or a hearing, as an attorney in a smaller court is more likely to have experience with the specific courtroom practices in that court.

Looking Forward

Rural courts face unique challenges. Self-help centers in rural courts are creating solutions through innovation and collaboration, such as SHARP Tech Connect, and by developing shared resources.

CHAPTER 12: Services for People Who Are Incarcerated

"Providing assistance to incarcerated people is not easy. Almost all assistance is provided by mail, and legal processes and concepts can be very difficult to explain without being able to speak with someone directly. Still, without our help, many would face insurmountable obstacles when they are released. We help them to modify child support orders and help them to clear up other legal problems so that they can more successfully re-enter society."[186]

The Need for Services

As of June 30, 2020, there were over 114,000 persons incarcerated in California state prisons, institutions, and camps, including over 4,000 who are women.[187] These people have few resources to assist them with outstanding and ongoing legal issues such as child support, child custody and visitation, divorce, guardianships, and other issues that are often precipitated by incarceration. Individuals who are incarcerated often reach out to the courts for help.[188] While this is a small proportion of the self-help center workload, it is an important component of access to justice.

Child support is among the most commonly requested topics of self-help assistance. The need for these services increased significantly on January 1, 2020, when Family Code section 4007.5 expired. That statute automatically suspended child support orders upon incarceration and reinstituted them upon release. Without this statute, incarcerated child support obligors continue to accrue child support debt, even though they likely have no income. Unless they file for modification with the court, they potentially face insurmountable debt upon release, and they must figure out how to file this modification from jail or prison. Assembly Bill 2325 (Carillo),[189] enacted September 28, 2020, reinstated Family Code section 4007.5, but introduced further complications for incarcerated litigants because calculations for child support will be impacted by the sunset of the provision and the almost nine-month gap before its reenactment.

Because the need is so widespread, 41 court-based self-help centers provide services to persons who are incarcerated. Most of the assistance is provided by mail. Four of the self-help centers offer inmate services on-site at their local jail or prison, another two counties accept phone calls from inmates, and one county offers services to inmates appearing at case management conferences.

---

[186] Self-help center director interview.

[187] Cal. Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation population reports, www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/population-reports-2/.

[188] The only legal services agencies that report providing assistance to prisoners with family law issues are Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and the Harriett Buhai Center for Family Law.

[189] Stats. 2020, ch. 217.

Mail Services

California's prisons do not offer access to the internet, and thus, the vast majority of services are provided by mail. Assisting a person with legal self-help issues by mail can be time-consuming. The general procedure begins when the self-help staff reads the request and determines what the person is requesting. This can be arduous due to poor handwriting or the incarcerated person's inability to clearly articulate the issues. Because litigants are often confused about the status of the case, staff must find the case and read the files.

Once the self-help staff person understands the procedural nature of the case, they can provide information and forms that allow the litigant to move forward in their matter. This may mean that self-help staff must personalize a response that includes blank forms and instructions. Some self-help centers will review pleadings from inmates, make their copies, and file the completed forms for them because prisoners rarely have access to copy machines and must write in pencil. A few self-help centers will serve the opposing side by mail to ensure proper service.

On-Site Workshops, Phone Access, and Other Efforts

Four self-help centers provide workshops at their local prison or jail. These workshops generally cover child support, child custody, and common family law topics. One court sends staff to a monthly information fair at the prison to answer questions and provide information on services. While these on-site presentations can be challenging to arrange, they are well attended, with a pilot family law workshop that was held in a prison before the pandemic drawing over 100 participants.

Uses of Expansion Funding

Along with staff augmentation, self-help centers used the expansion funding to improve services to incarcerated persons by developing handouts on self-help services for the prisons and other institutions. Centers conducted outreach to jails and prisons for sharing that information. Self-help centers also developed short videos and recorded workshops on key topics, all of which will be offered to the prison and jail law libraries. Self-help centers also provided more workshops in the prisons and plan to do more when the pandemic shutdowns are eased.

Benefits

Self-help staff throughout the state providing assistance to incarcerated litigants report similar benefits. Thirty-five self-help centers that serve inmates responded to a survey on inmate services: 95 percent reported that they are able to address specific issues for the inmates, that the forms submitted by incarcerated persons are prepared more thoroughly with self-help assistance, leading to fewer rejections of those forms by the clerk, and that clerk time is saved. Other benefits include smoother court processes for the litigants and clear information for judicial officers. Ninety-four percent of the responding courts reported that inmates have no other access to legal assistance in these matters.

Prisoners face many of the same legal issues as the general population, except that those legal issues are exacerbated because of incarceration. For example, an incarcerated parent of a minor may need a guardianship or other custody arrangement. Incarceration often precipitates a filing of divorce, as well as the need to modify child support.

Self-help centers assist inmates by providing information, forms, and instructions in the following case types:

- Divorce, legal separation, and nullity
- Child support
- Child custody and visitation
- Parentage
- General civil
- Small claims
- Guardianship
- Restraining orders

The time courts devote to self-help services for incarcerated people ranges from as little as half an hour per month to 25 hours per month responding to inmate mail. Statewide, self-help centers spend at least 217.5 hours per month responding to inmate mail, or an average of 6.2 hours per month each.

Challenges

The benefits to offering inmate services are great, but the challenges can also be monumental. Most courts who serve incarcerated people find it to be a challenge because communication is not synchronized. In other words, there are significant problems with undeliverable or returned mail due to the inmate being moved or released. Furthermore, the litigant's legal problems are exacerbated by their not receiving notices promptly, so they are delayed or barred from filing or responding to filings.

Additionally, it requires a great deal of skill to explain legal processes and instruct how to fill out forms when the U.S. Postal Service is the only form of communication. The vast majority of courts who work with incarcerated people find explaining nuanced and difficult information laborious. Transfers cause even more upheaval. A litigant may be in mid-communication, having reached out to a self-help center for assistance, but then is moved before the reply arrives. This results in their matter being delayed or lost. Where child support is involved, the litigant may have no meaningful opportunity to respond to a summons and complaint because of these issues with delayed and slow communication.

CHAPTER 13: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic—Court Self-Help Centers Adapt in the Face of Immense Challenges

"We have quickly adapted to delivering services remotely to ensure that the public has ongoing access to the court. In times of crisis, our customers need us more than ever, particularly to address issues either caused or worsened by the pandemic such as domestic violence, housing, child custody disputes and child support modifications."[190]

In response to the rapid spread of COVID-19, Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency for California on March 4, 2020. On March 23, Chief Justice Tani G. Cantil-Sakauye issued a statewide emergency order to assist courts responding to shelter-in-place orders. On March 19, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-33-20, requiring all Californians to stay home, subject to certain limited exemptions. Court operations were exempted, meaning they were allowed to continue operations so long as they could ensure court users' safety.

Many courthouses closed initially to develop and implement emergency pandemic protocols, opening soon thereafter to hear emergency cases including domestic violence, emergency child custody and support issues, and dependency cases. In some courts, self-help program staff were maintained as part of the skeleton crew during the initial courthouse closure, answering phone and email questions to ensure immediate access to justice for those who needed it during the state of emergency. Like other parts of the court, self-help centers changed their operations to handle the public's needs during the shelter-in-place orders. These changes were facilitated, in part, by increased self-help program funding in 2018 that was used for technology that would prove vital to providing assistance during the shelter-in-place orders.

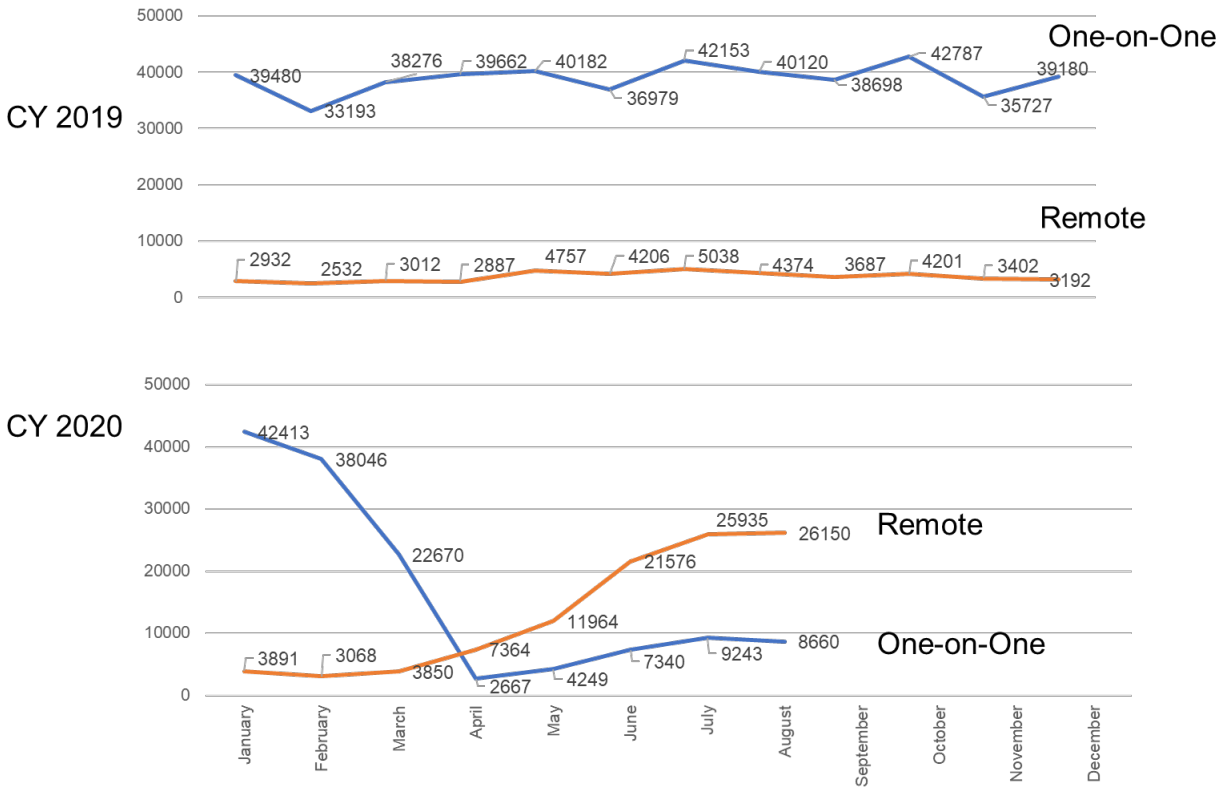
The pandemic shifted social, political, and other societal systems on a truly epic scale. And, as of the writing of this report, the mid- and long-term effects of COVID-19 cannot be fully known; and they likely will not be reconciled for years. Nevertheless, given the high rates of unemployment and financial challenges, a growing number of people will be unable to afford attorneys as they try to address critical legal problems, making self-help services more critical than ever. The anxiety that a litigant may feel in having to deal with the court has been compounded with the addition of issues related to health fears, unemployment, and housing insecurity.

Out of 58 courts, 33 self-help centers (57 percent) remained open to assist the public either in person or, as in most cases, via remote services within one week after closure. Statewide, court self-help centers were closed an average of 2.4 weeks, although several remained closed for

[190] Self-help center director.

extended periods, while others never closed.[191] By June 30, 46 percent of self-help centers were able to provide in-person self-help assistance, and nearly all provided remote assistance.[192]

Figure 35. One-on-One and Remote Encounters, Calendar Year (CY) 2019 to 2020



Source: STARS Customer Information Database.

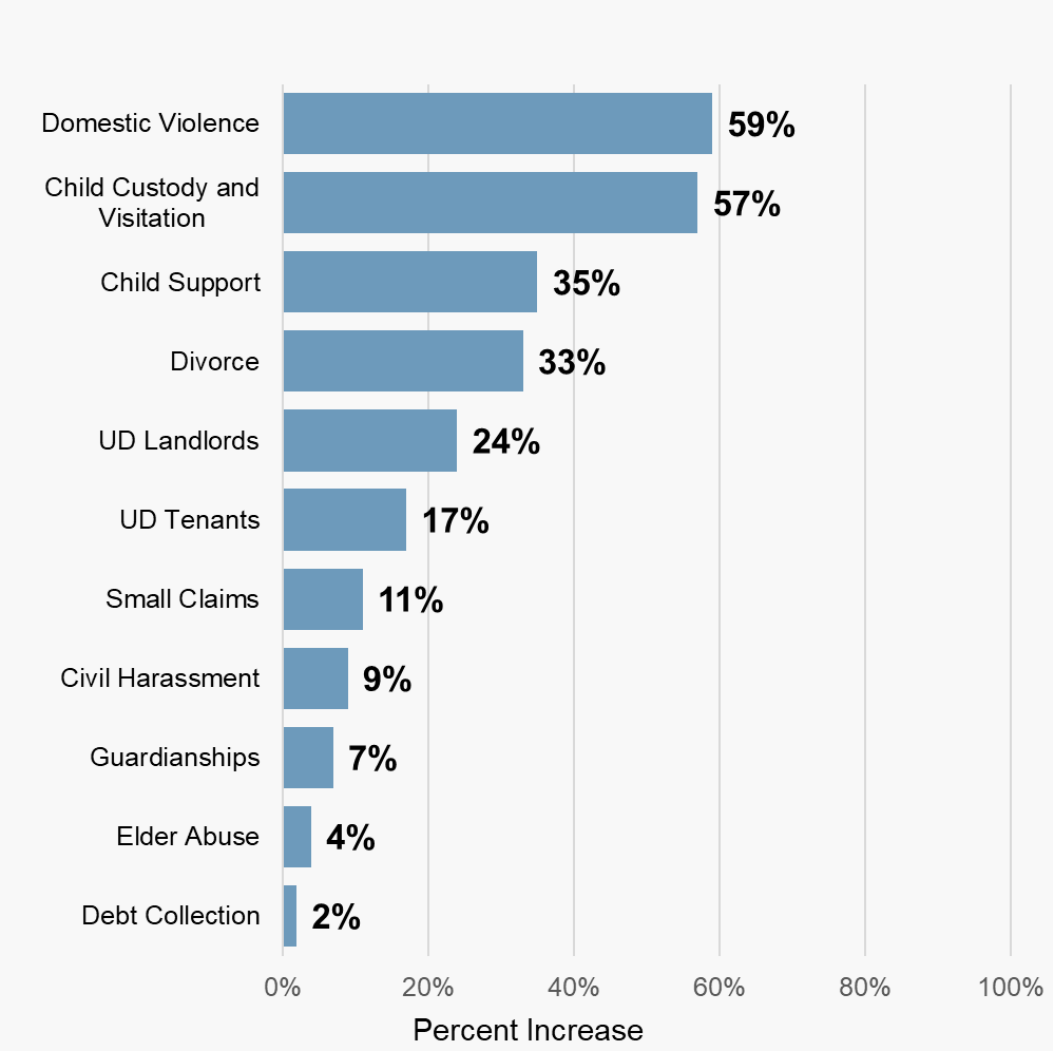
Impact on Types of Services Requested by the Public

The shelter-in-place orders affected the types of cases for which people sought help from self-help centers, just as the pandemic is likely to continue to impact the work of self-help centers for the foreseeable future.

[191] Weekly self-help center webinar conducted during pandemic.

[192] Self-help center program FY 2019–20 Q4 quarterly report; n = 54.

Figure 36. Increase in Requests for Self-Help Center Services, by Case Type (March 15–June 30, 2020)



Source: STARS Customer Information Database.

Self-Help Centers Quickly Adapted Services to Meet the Public's Needs

Shelter-in-place orders took effect so suddenly that courts, like other institutions and businesses, needed to adapt—and adopt new work rules, including teleworking models—to maintain the public's access to justice while courthouses were closed. Before the pandemic, most self-help centers principally provided in-person services; upon the issuance of shelter-in-place orders, they needed to quickly rethink service methods to provide remote services.

To provide a forum for sharing ideas, in April 2020 Judicial Council staff launched weekly interactive online meetings with self-help center staff. Between 65 to 100 self-help staff attended these sessions each week. This platform allowed for updates to the law, and for center staff to

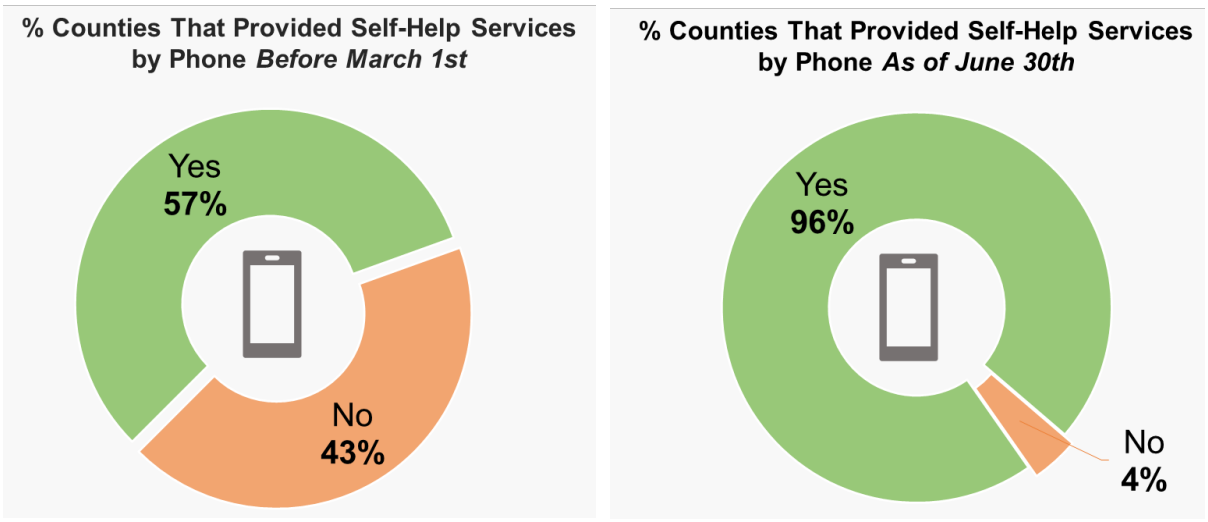
discuss their unique problems and share solutions that might be adapted in other counties. Self-help center staff also exchanged ideas and resources on the Equal Access listserve, which is maintained by the Judicial Council.

Self-help staff also shared information about videoconferencing solutions for workshops and one-on-one appointments. They discussed ways to provide forms packages and instructions to litigants via email, text, mail, and drop-off spots at their courts; they also shared solutions for reviewing and correcting forms completed by litigants. Self-help staff exchanged ideas about how to help litigants with document assembly programs, how much time to allow for phone services, and ways to provide services using live chat. They also shared information on what safety precautions they would use to reestablish in-person services. This support and practical information allowed for rapid development of new ways to serve the public.

Expansion of Assistance by Phone

Self-help centers greatly expanded the use of assistance by phone during the shelter-in-place orders. While 31 courts (57 percent of self-help centers) provided phone services before the declared state of emergency in March 2020, 52 courts (96 percent of self-help centers) offered phone assistance as of June 30 as a result of shelter-in-place requirements. Most centers reported that they spent an average of 31 to 40 minutes per phone call assisting self-represented litigants, for an average of 27 hours per week.[193]

Figure 37. Number of Hours per Week Self-Help Centers Offered Phone Services: Before March 1, 2020, and as of June 30, 2020

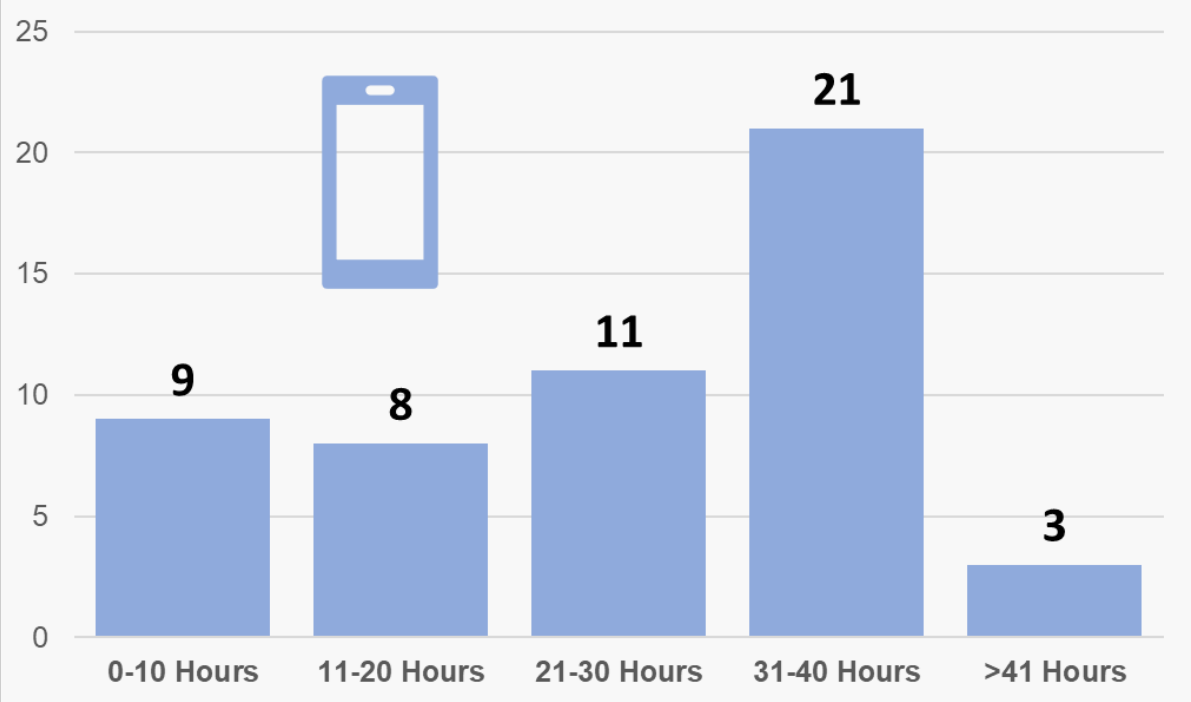


Source: Self-Help Center program FY 2019–20 Q4 quarterly report. N=54.

[193] *Id.*

Many centers provided phone services full time, reflecting the same hours they had previously provided for in-person assistance. Combined with the increased use of email and traditional postal mail, which allowed them to send forms and instructions, as well as to review drafts of forms completed by litigants, centers provided extensive assistance with technology that was readily available and easy for the public to use.

Figure 38. Number of Hours per Week Self-Help Centers Offered Phone Services as of June 30, 2020



Source: Self-Help Center program FY 2019–20 Q4 quarterly report. N=49.

Technology and Modified Self-Help Services

While many self-help centers utilized technology resources before the COVID-19 pandemic, technology became much more of an integral requirement for the delivery of self-help services. As shown in Figure 39 below, self-help centers rapidly expanded their use of technology during the first months of the pandemic. Self-help expansion funding was used on some technological resources, particularly computer equipment and software for use in the self-help centers.

Figure 39. Change in Services During the Pandemic

Are you providing *any of the following online services?*	Offered before March 1, 2020*	Offered as of June 30, 2020*	Percentage Increase
Guide & File	25	26	4%
HotDocs	28	27	-4%
Other Form-Filling Programs	17	14	-18%
Online Workshops—Live	16	7	-56%
Online Workshops—Prerecorded	5	2	-60%
Online Sessions with Customers	6	23	283%
Online Mediation	0	14	
Email Assistance—Answering Questions	37	46	24%
Email Assistance—Reviewing Paperwork	25	45	80%
Live Chat	2	10	400%
Text Services	1	4	300%
E-Filing	18	21	17%
Online Calendaring for Appointments	14	13	-7%
Expanded Self-Help Content on Your Website	19	34	79%
Co-Browsing *(you and the customer are looking at the same document online)*	6	21	250%
Other *(courts described partnerships & increased use of phone)*	4	14	250%

Source: Self-Help Center program FY 2019–20 Q4 quarterly report. N=54.

** Number of courts reporting: 58.*

While growing numbers of litigants appeared to be using technology because of shelter-in-place orders—and as communications platforms became increasingly used by the public—centers needed to be mindful that providing services only through remote means cannot meet the needs of everyone. Technology can exacerbate resource and skill gaps, particularly for low-income people and those with limited proficiency in English. As one self-help director noted, "It is challenging for people who are not used to doing things online. It is also more challenging for non-English speakers."

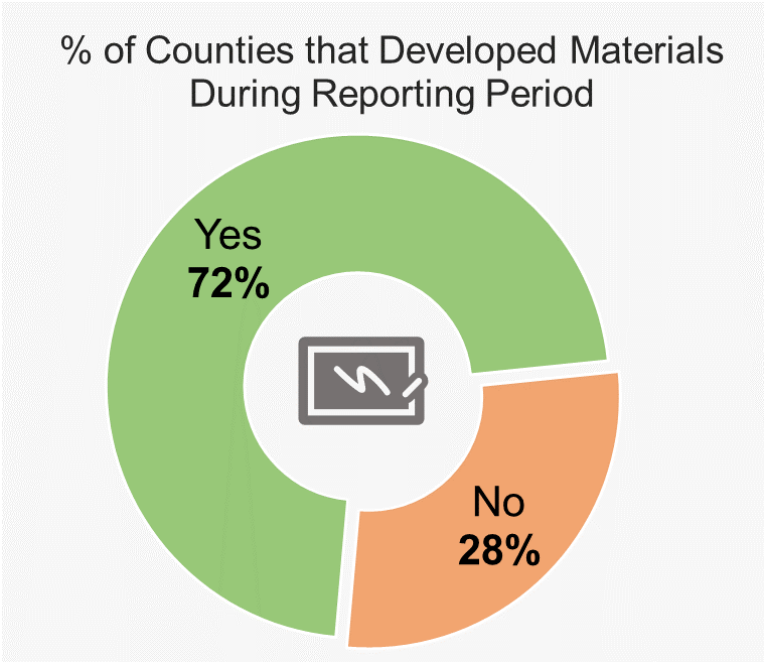
Live Chat

The Superior Court of San Mateo County expanded their live chat program (as discussed in Chapter 8 on remote services). Since self-help staff had remote access to court files, they were able to answer litigants' detailed questions about their cases while the courthouse was closed. Bilingual staff enabled them to provide chat services in both English and Spanish. After the San Mateo court made a presentation on how they provided these services at one of the weekly statewide self-help meetings, eight other courts followed suit.

Online Resources

In order to address questions related to the changes in law and procedures as a result of the pandemic, 39 of 54 responding courts (72 percent) developed new materials for the public and posted them online. These materials included information about self-help operations during the pandemic, how remote hearings would be conducted, and how to use document assembly tools. They also created information sheets and packets to help people understand the revised deadlines and legal issues for the most urgent case types: child support, domestic violence, and eviction.[194]

Figure 40. Percentage of Counties That Developed New Materials Between March 1 and June 30, 2020



Source: Self-Help Center program FY 2019–20 Q4 quarterly report. N = 54.

In an effort to reach as many people as possible while shelter-in-place orders remained in effect, self-help centers sought to make the information as easy to understand as possible. For example, the Superior Court of Mendocino County's self-help center quickly developed one video to help explain how victims of domestic violence could get help during the pandemic,[195] and another on

[194] *Id.*

[195] Superior Court of Mendocino County self-help center, "How to Get Help If You Are Being Abused," www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQlMMwTlOPo.

how to find and use free document assembly programs in English[196] and in Spanish[197] to fill out their court forms. These videos were produced in-house by staff using self-help expansion funds.

Videoconferencing/Webinar Workshops

In response to the limitations on mobility and public access because of the pandemic, courts also expanded their use of videoconferencing for one-on-one meetings with litigants, and eight courts also used videoconferencing to offer workshops as of June 30, 2020. Staff found that "[l]itigants enjoy the convenience of webinar workshops because of the time they save. They do not have to take time off work, find a day care provider, etc." However, staff found that "it can be very challenging to explain how to complete … forms that are generally reviewed in person."

Using videoconferencing technology, the Superior Court of Santa Clara County began providing settlement services to assist self-represented litigants to meet and confer before the parties' online hearing.[198] Other courts reported using videoconferencing to review documents they had remotely helped litigants to complete.

[196] *Id.*, "Doing Your Court Forms Online—California (English)," www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d7_t_TU64M.

[197] *Id.*, Cómo llenar sus formularios de la corte en línea—California (Doing Your Court Forms Online—Spanish)," www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXcVCtGhSng.

[198] See Chapter 10 on settlement services for additional information.

Case Study: ACCESS Center, Superior Court of San Francisco County

Before the issuance of shelter-in-place orders, San Francisco's ACCESS (Assisting Court Customers with Education and Self-help Services) Center offered no virtual services. All assistance, except for information on the website, was provided in person. People who requested assistance had their needs assessed and were provided one-on-one service immediately, by appointment, or scheduled for a workshop.

In the second week of March 2020, a customer came to the center who required immediate assistance with an answer to an eviction case. That individual was coughing and reported to be waiting for results from a COVID-19 test. As a result, staff at the center were immediately quarantined and the center was closed for six weeks. It was during this closure that the ACCESS Center team developed a new model of service and came to offer extensive virtual support. Like other centers, they realized that expanding remote access was critical, not only in the time of the pandemic emergency, but also as an ongoing convenience to many customers. The changes became a wholesale upgrade to their service model.

In the new model, ACCESS Center staff offered both remote and on-site services. Because abrupt changes cause confusion, staff endeavored to mirror pre-COVID-19 service schedules. Both remote and on-site services were scheduled for mornings, then resumed after lunch on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Wednesdays were reserved for emergency cases and videoconference workshops. Staff also assisted in the courtrooms on Wednesdays. On Fridays, staff focused on meeting with litigants with complex cases or who needed follow-up in the morning. They developed and updated informational materials and met with collaborative partners in the afternoon.

ACCESS Center staff also reinvented their triage methods. Rather than having customers wait in line, under the new remote system customers could reach the center remotely to

- make an appointment via the online calendaring system;
- connect to a live chat agent; or
- access the email system via a SurveyMonkey intake process.

If a customer appears in person, the customer receives a ticket to return at a designated time that same morning. In order to manage this system, just 40 appointments are available per day. Appointment information is coordinated with court security to maintain occupancy controls. In-person support notwithstanding, due to space considerations customers are encouraged to use online services.

Case Types and Services Addressed During the Pandemic

Domestic Violence

As the pandemic continued and shelter-in-place orders were extended, incidents of domestic violence began to rise.[199] Self-help centers were called upon to provide extensive assistance with domestic violence cases. The Judicial Council adopted several rules to provide temporary protection during the pandemic. This included emergency rule 8 of the California Rules of Court that extended the time that an emergency protective order obtained by the police could remain in effect, and automatically extended civil and criminal protective orders for up to 90 days.[200] Preliminary data from STARS indicates that domestic violence was one of the two case types that had rebounded, in one-on-one services provided, by August 2020 to over 80 percent of pre-pandemic monthly levels.[201]

Child Custody and Visitation

Cases regarding child custody orders were particularly challenging because stay-at-home orders did not easily lend themselves to situations in which children normally spent time in different households. As the pandemic worsened, parents increasingly expressed concern about the safety of children in the care of the other parent who might have been an essential worker or first responder, or in situations in which one parent agreed with and followed shelter-in-place protocols and the other did not. Families struggled with methods to pick up and drop off children when people were ordered to not travel outside their counties, and those limited to supervised visitation and exchange services found it difficult to find supervisors given the health risks and social distancing requirements.

Child Support

Many parents lost jobs during the pandemic, which meant that many needed an increase in child support payments while others required a reduction in child support amounts.[202] Yet significant numbers of these parents could not file papers to request a change of their child support orders because some courts were not yet accepting or processing filings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Judicial Council adopted emergency rule 13 of the California Rules of Court on April 19, 2020, which allowed a parent to mail an unfiled copy of a request to change a support order to the child's other parent or the local child support agency.[203] Under the order, after mailing notice to the other parent, the requesting parent had to file the papers with

---

[199] Joseph Hayes and Heather Harris, *Hidden Risk of Domestic Violence during COVID-19* (July 21, 2020), Public Policy Institute of California, *www.ppic.org/blog/hidden-risk-of-domestic-violence-during-covid-19/*.

[200] Cal. Rules of Court, emergency rules 1–11, adopted effective April 6, 2020, *https://jcc.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8234474&GUID=79611543-6A40-465C-8B8B-D324F5CAE349*.

[201] STARS Customer Information Database, January – August 2020.

[202] See, e.g., Sara O'Brien, "What to do if you're struggling to pay child support or alimony during the coronavirus crisis" (Apr. 21, 2020) *CNBC*, *www.cnbc.com/2020/04/21/what-to-do-if-struggling-to-pay-child-support-amid-coronavirus-crisis.html*.

[203] Judicial Council of Cal., *Family Law: Emergency Rule Regarding Effective Date to Modify Support in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic* (CO-20-07), *https://jcc.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=M&ID=777454&GUID=82EB3587-DFCC-42CE-AA75-97A21CE2507C*.

the court. Once the court accepted the filing, the requesting parent was responsible for serving the other party officially. This emergency process both preserved the right of a parent to either pay or receive a changed amount and preserved the role of the court in authorizing a changed amount. When a court date became available, the judge or child support commissioner was able to rule on the request, and, if needed, make a change effective to the date when the forms were first mailed to the other parent or local child support agency, instead of only when the request was filed.

Divorce

Self-help centers informally report significant increases in questions about divorce. Preliminary data from STARS indicates that divorce was one of the two case types that had rebounded, in one-to-one services provided, by August 2020 to over 80 percent of pre-pandemic monthly levels.[204]

Guardianships

The pandemic required some families to find alternative care arrangements for their children. Parents sought information about guardianships as they asked others to take care of their children due to fear of infection or needed information about how to make arrangements for their children if the parents died. Increased numbers of grandparents and other caretakers sought guidance on how to assist in caring for children whose parents were suffering from depression or substance abuse.[205]

Landlords

The Judicial Council's first emergency rule, emergency rule 1, was adopted on April 6, 2020, to stop eviction proceedings other than for those few circumstances where public health and safety were at risk.[206] The council also adopted emergency rule 2, which stopped foreclosure proceedings.[207] Landlords, many of whom had lost their jobs and were renting out one or more rooms in their homes or apartments, had questions about how to protect themselves if their tenants stopped paying rent, or acted in an unsafe manner. This has continued to be a complicated area of law as moratorium dates shifted, local ordinances and Assembly Bill 3088[208] were enacted, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued an order to temporarily halt residential evictions.[209]

---

[204] STARS Customer Information Database, January – August 2020.

[205] Weekly self-help center webinar conducted during pandemic.

[206] Cal. Rules of Court, emergency rules 1–11, adopted effective April 6, 2020, *https://jcc.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=8234474&GUID=79611543-6A40-465C-8B8B-D324F5CAE349*..

[207] *Ibid.*

[208] Assem. Bill 3088 (Stats. 2020, ch. 37), *https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB3088*.

[209] 85 Fed. Reg. 55292 (Sept. 4, 2020), *www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-09-04/pdf/2020-19654.pdf*.

Tenants

Tenants needed guidance about the orders, emergency rule, and local ordinances designed to protect them from eviction. They often faced frustrated landlords who threatened to evict them, even if unlawfully. Given the rapidly changing state of the law, tenants were often confused about their rights. Self-help centers are expecting an increase in eviction cases once eviction moratoriums are lifted. A May 2020 report by the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy estimated that 365,000 residential evictions would occur in Los Angeles County alone, once the statewide moratoriums on evictions is lifted.[210] Early reports from states with expired eviction moratoriums showed immediate spikes in eviction filings.[211]

Small Claims and Debt Collection

Tens of thousands of Californians lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, which means that they may be having difficulty paying their bills. Some are already being contacted by debt collectors. Consumers sought assistance from self-help centers regarding the steps to take to respond to debt collectors. Some people reached out to court self-help centers to enforce debts that they believe are owed them in order to meet other obligations.

Looking Forward

Self-help centers displayed flexibility and creativity in their rapid shift to remote services after the pandemic shutdowns. Centers have learned that they can effectively offer remote services on a statewide scale and will continue after the pandemic to further enhance self-help centers' ability to provide access to justice to as many self-represented litigants as possible.

---

[210] Gary Blasi, *UD Day: Impending Evictions and Homelessness in Los Angeles* (UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, May 28, 2020), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gz6c8cv.

[211] "Landlords suing for $4M in unpaid rent as Harris County evictions move forward" (June 18, 2020) *KHOU 11*, www.khou.com/article/news/investigations/evictions-harris-county-landlords-suing-tenants-covid-19/285-8adb1f11-b5e2-44a3-ad9c-a433611fd243. See also "Despite available COVID-19 reprieve, Pima County evictions uneven, frequent" (June 16, 2020) *Tucson.com*, https://tucson.com/news/local/despite-available-covid-19-reprieve-pima-county-evictions-uneven-frequent/article_9c7ebe56-942f-5081-b33b-2b1578db9854.html; "The Columbus Convention Center Is Now a Pandemic Housing Court" (June 18, 2020) *Bloomberg CityLab*, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-18/how-do-you-hold-housing-court-in-a-pandemic?utm_medium=social&utm_content=citylab&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=socialflow-organic; "9,000 eviction hearings stalled by coronavirus resume Monday. Advocates say it's the beginning of a crisis" (June 14, 2020) *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, www.commercialappeal.com/story/news/2020/06/14/evictions-stalled-coronavirus-resume-monday-memphis/5328897002/.

CHAPTER 14: Impact of Self-Help Centers on Court Operations

"I really believe that if we didn't have in-person, or live, self-help support, there would be a significant portion of our litigants who just wouldn't make it to court at all. It's not just that they do better in court and can present things more clearly. But they would be unsuccessful in taking their matters to court. And many of those people have important matters. And so it would be a real loss to them and to our system if they didn't have this access to justice."[212]

"If the self-help centers shut down, Family Law shuts down."[213]

Courts and the public have a shared interest in self-help services. By assisting self-represented litigants to prepare proper legal documents and navigate judicial proceedings, court-based self-help centers provide access to justice by enabling litigants to handle their legal issues. They also help to improve the efficiency of the court, and help courts fulfill their mandate of providing justice under the law. Self-represented litigants are better prepared in many ways as a result of self-help center assistance—with their legal documents, with explanations of procedure, and with improved and reasonable expectations about what the law will allow and what the court can do. As a result, judges can spend more time hearing cases and explaining rulings. Courts can handle more matters and can resolve cases more quickly, minimizing the time that all litigants have to wait to have their cases completed.

There are many ways in which self-help centers reduce the time spent by other parts of the court, not only improving the efficiency, but also the effectiveness of the court in addressing the legal issues of the public. This chapter describes the costs of providing different kinds of self-help services and how those services help courts avoid costs and delays.

Impact of Self-Help Center Services on Court Operations

In order to establish the impact of self-help services on court operations, Judicial Council staff undertook a series of remote focus groups and interviews with judicial officers, court administrators, court staff, and self-help directors.

Five focus groups were conducted remotely by webinar in June and July of 2020 with self-help center staff across the state. A total of 29 individuals from 27 courts participated in the focus groups. The focus groups provided information about issues that arise in the provision of services to different populations or by different methods, as well as the impact of those services on courts and litigants. Focus group topics included rural services, workshops and clinics,

[212] Focus group—judicial officer.

[213] *Ibid.*

serving persons with limited English proficiency, videoconferencing and live chat, and settlement services.

Three more focus groups were conducted online remotely in July 2020 with judges and court self-help center staff from 11 courts. Eleven judicial officers and 12 court operations staff participated, including a court executive officer, a judicial assistant, a Family Court Services director, family law and civil law administrators, and 6 self-help center directors.

Figure 41. Focus Group Assessment of Self-Help Services

How Consistently Do the Self-Help Services In Your Jurisdiction Achieve the Results Below?	Average Rating (Scale: 1 to 5)
Fewer filings are rejected for flaws	4.44
Court forms are easier to read because they are typed	4.44
Parties understand their cases better	4.25
Needed information and referral resources are readily available	4.22
Judges and court staff can review documents in less time	4.19
Document filings are complete and informative	4.06
Orders after hearing are complete, prepared timely and filed correctly	3.97
Parties can get the expert Self-Help Center help when needed	3.83
Judges can spend less time preparing for hearings	3.83
Non-English speakers understand the court process and outcomes	3.72
The time from filing to disposition is reduced	3.72
Parties understand court decisions better	3.61
Parties are better able to negotiate effective agreements	3.60
Less expert staff can deliver many services effectively	3.58
There are fewer unnecessary case continuances	3.56
The parties save time preparing for court hearings	3.53
Parties represent themselves better during hearings	3.50
The parties don't have to come to court as frequently	3.48
Parties are effective even if the other side has an attorney	3.47
Clerks and other court staff can prepare calendars timely	3.41
Parties are more likely to comply with court orders	3.25
Parties are more satisfied with the case outcome	3.17
Parties are able to manage complex procedures such as discovery	2.57
Source: Focus groups pre-survey, June–July 2020, N=29.	

Focus Group and Interview Findings

Participants were surveyed prior to the focus groups and asked to consider, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), "How consistently do the Self-Help Center services available in your jurisdiction achieve the results listed below?"

Across the board, participants reported that their self-help centers were most effective in helping self-represented litigants prepare accurate, complete, timely, and legible filings and pleadings. This led to clerks and judges being able to review their documents in less time. Courts also reported that parties appeared to understand their cases better, and that necessary resources were made readily available so that litigants could be rapidly referred for additional information and assistance. The only area that courts identified as being less effective was having litigants manage complex processes like discovery, which reflects the reports from self-help centers in which they acknowledge they have only been able to undertake limited expansion into these more complex areas of civil litigation.

Legible, Focused, and Complete Pleadings

Self-help centers spend a significant portion of their resources assisting litigants with the legal documents needed for their cases. This assistance avoids added costs throughout the court process—from the clerk's window to the courtroom.

Judges and clerks report that there are two ways that documents prepared with the assistance of self-help centers are improved. First, they are more legible than those prepared by self-represented litigants on their own. Legible documents save processing time and increase accuracy when clerks do not have to try to decipher handwriting for entry into the case management system, and when judges read and review the documents. Perhaps more importantly, courts report that documents prepared with the assistance of self-help center staff properly focus on the issues to be decided and contain relevant information.

> *"It's a huge savings of time in reviewing documents. They know what information is needed, and they don't add extraneous information that you have to read through in order to find the single items that are important."*
>
> *–Judge (Large Court)*

As more courts add document assembly programs to their menu of services, a growing number of forms and attached declarations will not just be legible, they will be properly formatted and typed, making them consistent with other professionally prepared court documents. They will be more complete, as well. This emphasis on legibility, formatting, completeness, and orderliness of court documents cannot be overstated. The amount of time these well-prepared documents save window clerks, filing clerks, court staff, and judicial officers is significant.

> *"The difference in the quality of the documents that are prepared with the assistance of the self-help center, and those that are prepared without them is dramatic."*
>
> *–Judge (Large County)*

Judges handling family law cases report that it takes two to three times longer to review documents prepared by people who have not gone to the self-help center: "It's not just the

legibility problem … but they don't understand the process. … The self-help center provides guidance on what needs to be presented so that it is concise and meets all the points."[214]

This assistance is particularly helpful in civil cases that do not have or require the use of Judicial Council forms.

> I find that instead of [self-represented litigants] just copying something off the internet that may have nothing to do with their case, or having a friend help, (and those kinds of things tend to be challenging to read …), if they can get to the self-help center, they can get guidance, and a sample form.[215]

Participants in focus groups of judicial officers and court staff estimate that judges save at least 50 percent of their review time by having legible, focused, and complete pleadings to review.[216] Of course, that review time varies between the type of case and the stage of the proceeding, from a savings of just a few minutes to a savings of multiple hours. Judicial officers and clerks further report that pleadings prepared with assistance from self-help centers are much more likely to be complete and accurately prepared.

Clerks reported that without self-help assistance, litigants may have their forms rejected five or six times:

> With self-help, we have found that [clerk time] is cut down considerably. It's cut it down by hours because [self-represented litigants] go to one place they get to ask all the questions, and then when [the matter] comes back into the court, it's all ready to go to the judge to just be reviewed … It's got all the detailed information the judge needs to make a decision.[217]

Self-help centers also save clerk time by making copies and assembling form sets in the right order. Without the assistance of the self-help center, many litigants find it challenging to make the correct number of copies and to assemble the forms and copies into the proper sets for filing. When litigants are not prepared, the clerk either rejects the filing, which means that the clerk has to handle it again when the litigant comes back, or the clerk takes time to separate all the pages and then collate them in the correct order. Self-help centers avoid this inefficiency.

[214] Focus group—judicial officer.

[215] *Ibid.*

[216] Focus group—judicial officers and court staff.

[217] Focus group—court administrator.

Litigants Better Prepared, Hearings More Efficient

Judges in focus groups and interviews consistently agreed that self-help centers increase their efficiency in the courtroom. As one judge noted, "[W]hen people who have been through the self-help center appear in court, they have a better understanding of the process. They have a better understanding of what they need to present."

> *"The assistance that they get [from the self-help center] makes our courtroom proceedings much more efficient. And because we're more efficient, we're able to hear more cases more quickly."*
>
> *–Judge (Large County)*

And, as another judge stated, "If we didn't have the self-help center, frankly, the caseload would be dramatically impacted. And the wait time for the litigants would get extended dramatically. … If a case was going to take an hour if they [litigants] were well prepared, it might take up to three hours if they're not well prepared"[218]

One court administrator noted that the self-help center has litigants lay out their requests as "1, 2, 3, 4, this is what I need the judge to do," and so, if a self-represented litigant becomes […] confused about what the court is asking, the self-help center staff have helped the litigant so the judge can just refer to the request for order, and walk the litigant through their own paperwork.[219]

A judge in a large county described how the self-help center assists her in making sure that she can get the information she needs to make a decision:

> Self-represented folks tend to have difficulty in front of a judge, basically setting forth the issues and argument presenting their evidence. And the self-help center really allows them to sit down with somebody to organize their thoughts and organize their paperwork. … That way, when it comes to me I can lead the proceedings and figure out what to do with the issues by prompting the self-represented litigants.[220]

Judges and court staff also report that litigants who have been to the self-help center seem to express less "raw emotion" in court because self-help staff help litigants work through their emotions and frustrations and achieve a clearer understanding of procedure and what will happen in court.

Preparation of Judgments and Orders After Hearings

Another vital service that self-help centers provide is assistance with findings and orders after hearings and final judgments.

---

[218] Focus group—judicial officer.

[219] Focus group—court administrator.

[220] Focus group—judicial officer.

Preparation of orders and judgments for signature by the judge is traditionally a role of the attorney in family, probate, or civil law cases. This involves understanding what order the judge made, either through notetaking during the hearing or trial or by reviewing minute orders prepared by a clerk and translating those minute orders into the appropriate legal language and format. Without assistance, few self-represented litigants accomplish this. Many litigants do not realize that typically these orders and judgments are not prepared by judges or the court. The judge will generally order the party who has prevailed in the action to draft the order for the judge's review and signature.

Self-help centers throughout California prepared more than 40,052 orders and judgments in 2019. When judgments are prepared by the self-help centers, judges report that the necessary information is included and requirements are met, saving significant time for review and minimizing rejections.

One judicial officer described the operational efficiencies of self-help center staff preparing orders after hearing:

> Our self-help center assists all the self-represented litigants with preparing their orders after hearing. The self-help center prepares them directly from the clerk's minute orders. That saves a lot of time for the clerk who no longer has to review the orders after hearing to ensure that they match their minutes. Also, if there's any question about what a minute order means, the self-help center contacts the clerk so that they make sure that the order is clear.

The Superior Court of Alameda County studied cases for which the court had prepared an order after hearing for self-represented litigants and those for which the court had not. Over the course of the two and a half years of cases studied, the Alameda court found that when it had prepared orders immediately after the hearing, only 20 percent of self-represented litigants (8,136) returned to court for further orders on the same issues. On the other hand, of those who were given the standard direction to prepare their own order after hearing for review, 42 percent (17,086) returned to court on the same issues.[221]

Default Judgments

Family law procedures in California are designed so that many matters can proceed without both parties being required to file papers with the court, while still allowing input from both parties. The family law process allows for a "default with agreement" that does not require the respondent to pay a filing fee or submit other papers to the court; instead, this process allows the parties to have a written agreement made into a court order. This design was intentional, in recognition of the large number of people without lawyers, the high cost of filing fees for people responding to cases in California,[222] and the emotional reality that some people do not want to

[221] Judicial Council of Cal., *Family Law Resource Guideline Study: Assistance to Self-Represented Litigants* (2010).

[222] See the Statewide Civil Fee Schedule at www.courts.ca.gov/documents/filingfees.pdf.

actively contest divorce or parentage actions or participate in the process by filing legal documents.

In order to approve these default judgments, the court must review the pleadings carefully to ensure that the judgment only covers issues that were identified in the petition, that property appears to be divided equally (unless the parties have agreed otherwise in writing and the court has confidence that the parties did in fact agree), that the child support award meets guidelines, that the parties have exchanged declarations of disclosures, and the child custody arrangements are found to be in the best interests of the children. If this information is clear in the paperwork, the parties do not have to appear in court, and the court may simply approve the default judgment. If all of this is not evident in the forms, or the forms are not completed properly, the default paperwork will be returned to the parties to be corrected, or the petitioner will be required to appear in person for a default hearing.[223] Both of these result in additional, and wasted, time in court for the parties.

By developing procedures to assist self-represented litigants in preparing court pleadings, self-help centers reduce the need for parties to appear in court for a default hearing. As one self-help center staffer noted, "The court does not have to do default prove-up hearings anymore because the forms are always filled out correctly. The clerk does not have to spend the time setting default hearings and the court does not have to hold the hearing at all."[224]

While default hearings are often scheduled for just a short amount of court time, often just five minutes each because they are uncontested, there are still significant costs to holding them and cost savings if they can be avoided. These savings can be used for the court to have more time for hearings on contested issues and allows other cases to be heard more promptly. It also saves the litigants the stress of a hearing, as well as the travel time and expense of going to court.

Settlement Assistance

Part of settlement assistance involves helping people develop reasonable expectations about their cases. Self-help centers help people to understand what the court can and cannot do. For example:

- It can be important for a person responding to a divorce case to know that the court will not require the person seeking the divorce to try to reconcile. Getting that information early in the case can dispel tension, clarify expectations, and help people move on with their lives.
- Helping a tenant understand that not having enough money to pay the rent is generally not sufficient grounds to stop an eviction can allow a tenant to focus on finding a new place to live, rather than collecting lots of documentation about their inability to pay rent.

[223] Fam. Code, § 2336.

[224] Focus group—self-help center attorney.

- Explaining the child support formula and running computer calculations based on different scenarios can often help the parents understand what is, and what is not, important in determining the final amount.

In other words, helping litigants understand that some factors will minimally impact the results and other factors will more significantly impact the results allows parties to either resolve their entire case or narrow the issues to be decided by the judge.

Resolving or Narrowing Issues

Settlement services often are available on the day of the scheduled court hearing so that judges can refer litigants to the self-help center for assistance. Settlement services include helping parties work out an agreement, memorializing agreements between the parties by drafting them into enforceable orders and judgments that a judge can review and authorize, assisting parties to memorialize judgments at case management conferences, and assisting parties to resolve issues as they draft orders after hearing.

Attorneys are nearly always directed to "meet and confer" with one another before the hearing starts to try to resolve the issues. Likewise, in courtrooms with large numbers of self-represented litigants, judges will often refer litigants to self-help centers for help in resolving or narrowing the issues for hearing. As a judge in one large court noted, the parties either resolve the matter and get help drafting their stipulation with the self-help center, or the parties return "to court with a memo from self-help telling us what the issue is, and it reduces maybe 10 issues to one that the judge has to rule on."[225]

There are significant advantages—and cost savings—to settling a case. When a case settles, there are no further hearings to calendar, saving the calendaring clerk time. There are no files to be pulled or prepared. The judge does not have to review the case file before each hearing or trial, because there are no more hearings, and there will be no more continuances, saving the time and effort to calendar, prepare, and hold hearings that have been continued. If the case is settled and final judgment is entered the litigant is saved the considerable time and effort to bring the case to trial. The self-help center has more time to devote to up-front services such as document preparation and settlement that assist self-represented litigants in timely resolution of the issues that brought them to court.

Self-help centers can also help the parties memorialize in writing any agreements reached on the day of hearing or trial, which helps the parties not only complete the agreement, but also helps to identify any areas of misunderstanding as they review the writing. This process helps avoid having to return to court to resolve those unclear issues. Judges are then able to review and approve these written agreements without delay.

[225] Focus group—judicial officer.

High Success Rate

Although self-help center staff reported in focus groups that more time is invested in self-help settlement services than many other services provided by self-help staff, they believe that settlement services are a good investment. Self-help centers report having a high degree of success resolving the issues presented by the litigants. Their combined records indicate that they are generally able to help the parties come to a resolution on all or a portion of the issues 90 percent of the time. With settlement assistance, the parties often resolve their cases earlier than if they go to trial—providing more savings to the court and to the litigants themselves who do not have to take time off for multiple hearings and manage the stress of litigation.

Courtroom Services and Judicial Referrals

Some self-help centers station staff in courtrooms to provide information and help parties come up with an agreement. Other centers have developed referral slips or similar protocols so people referred from a courtroom are helped immediately and able to return to the courtroom to finish their hearing that day.

Judges report that it is enormously helpful to be able to refer self-represented litigants to the self-help center. The litigants often have multiple questions, have not fully completed their forms, or need information regarding the court process. As one judge noted,

> I have a restraining order-only courtroom. I have a large number of self-represented litigants. And the calendars are large, and you have to move them quickly. And I try my best to provide access to justice and explain what went on. But if I grant a restraining order, I always tell them, you can always go to the self-help center and call them if you need help … I mention the self-help center on each and every case. … I don't think we can provide access to justice without this extra extension of what we do in the courtroom. I mean, they're vital.[226]

Self-help centers provided services in the courtroom 55,486 times in 2019.

Fewer Continuances

In addition to having papers completed correctly, self-help centers help litigants conduct proper service of process. Nearly all of the court actions that involve self-represented litigants require notification to the other party with a copy of the legal papers. That notification must be done properly; it must be delivered to the opposing party in person, by mail, email, certified mail, or other means depending on the case type, to where the other person lives, for each stage of the case, and must indicate whether or not the order from the court was an emergency order, as well as other factors. Improper service is a violation of the other party's due process rights. Proper service of process can be extremely challenging for self-represented litigants without assistance,

[226] Focus group—judicial officer.

and, along with incomplete filings, is the major cause of court continuances, which require a new hearing to be scheduled.

As with all hearings, continuances—which represent a repeat visit to the court, usually in front of a judge—are costly for the litigants as well as the court. Clerk time is required to review and process the additional proof of service forms and schedule a new hearing. The judge must review the file again, and then use courtroom time to address the problem. And the litigant, who did not have their matter heard, has to serve notice to the opposing parties yet again. These continuances mean that court calendars can be backed up for months, leading to more frustration for the litigants and preventing greater access to justice for all court users.

Continuances are not just a problem in family law cases; they are also a significant problem in probate matters such as petitions for guardianships and conservatorships, since there are often many family members who must be served with documents, and often multiple methods of service are required. Social services agencies also must be served with copies of the documents. If a child who is the subject of a guardianship is of Native American heritage, the tribal representative for the child's tribe or tribes must receive notice as well as copies of the pleadings by certified mail. Probate research attorneys who review files for guardianship matters report that it is very rare for self-represented litigants to accomplish the service requirements without assistance. As a result, often when the self-represented petitioners show up for their hearing, they cannot move forward because their documents have not been served properly. This leads to multiple continuances with repeated attempts at service, and repeated review of the pleadings by clerks and research attorneys. With assistance from the self-help center, litigants accomplish service properly on the first try approximately 70 percent of the time in probate cases.

Ability to Make Referrals Saves Clerks' Time

Clerk Referrals

Clerks and court administrators reported significant savings when court clerks can refer self-represented litigants to the self-help center for assistance.

> I remember way back before we had a self-help center, then, you know, it was so challenging to tell people "I don't know," and "I don't know where to send you," or to send them to someplace that was going to cost them money. [With self-help services,] something is close and easily accessible for them. And then they can just walk right over and get it dealt with right now.[227]

"We send all the parties to the self-help center for questions we can't answer, which is a lot."

–Court Clerk

Court administrators noted that not only does this save time, but it contributes to job statisfaction..

[227] Focus group—self-help center director.

> [T]hey get even more of a sense of satisfaction to be able to be helping in an area of litigation as difficult as family law—that they were able to help that person get to the right place.[228]

Clerks estimate by their own assessment that the time they save by being able to make referrals to the self-help center ranges between 5 and 45 minutes per self-represented litigant who needs additional help. While clerks are able to serve many self-represented litigants without referral, when a litigant has many questions or multiple problems with their pleadings, being able to make a referral to the self-help center for additional assistance allows clerks to handle more cases and keep the lines from getting too long.

Cost Efficiencies of a Court-Based Program

Self-help centers are particularly efficient because they are based within (or in some small counties very close to) the courthouse, allowing judges, clerks, and other court staff to refer to the self-help center for assistance, without the litigant having to leave the building. If a person comes in with paperwork that is not ready to be filed, the clerk can refer them directly to the self-help center so that it can be corrected and filed the same day. The judge can refer a litigant to the self-help center to complete a form needed for a hearing and the rest of the hearing can be conducted that same day. If self-help center staff have questions about a minute order that a clerk has prepared, they can easily contact the clerk for clarification. This ability to coordinate services for a litigant in one location saves enormous time for both the court and the litigants.

As court employees, self-help center staff have access to the registries of cases and court files in their courts. This access allows them to check the status of cases and determine if there is already a matter filed and where the case is in the process. This is in contrast to a legal aid provider or private attorney who must either get copies of those documents themselves or send the litigant to get copies.

Similarly, self-help centers are able to serve approximately twice as many people for brief services as legal aid providers can because they are not required to screen litigants for income or immigration status eligibility, nor do self-help programs have to check for legal conflicts since they do not establish an attorney-client relationship with those who use their services.[229] If the legal issue is one that the center can help with, using the self-help center is more efficient for the litigant and allows legal aid programs to focus on more complex services.

The self-help center also serves as a referral hub in the courthouse for other community organizations. Self-help staff are able to identify which legal aid agency or type of lawyer or lawyer referral service may be able to help those litigants who need legal advice or

---

[228] Focus group—court administrator.

[229] Self-Represented Litigation Network, *Serving Self-Represented Litigants Remotely: A Resource Guide* (July 1, 2016), prepared by John Greacen, Greacen Associates, LLC, p. 27, www.srln.org/system/files/attachments/Remote%20Guide%20Final%208-16-16_0.pdf.

representation. They also maintain referrals for additional resources that litigants may need, including domestic violence shelters; mental and substance abuse services; housing, shelter, and food security advocates; and the local child support agency.

Improved Cost Efficiencies for Other Court Programs

Self-help programs have as part of their mission communicating the needs of self-represented litigants within the court system to ensure that the litigants encounter a welcoming and accommodating environment within the courthouse and the courtroom. Self-help center staff identify processes that are particularly difficult for self-represented litigants and work with judges, lawyers, and other court staff to develop more effective alternatives.

> *"We're smoothing the whole process in every direction, you know, for the litigants, for the judicial officers, for the courtroom staff, we're just filling in the cracks and making sure everything is on all four wheels running in the right direction."*
>
> *–Self-Help Center Director*

The self-help centers also collect specific usage data through STARS on the case type, method of service, language needs, and other factors. Court leadership can use this data to forecast trends and examine whether their self-help service model is responding to needs in the community.

In helping to address self-represented litigants' needs, self-help centers collaborate with stakeholders within and external to the court. Internal stakeholders include clerks, research attorneys, mediators, court managers, interpreters, and judges. External stakeholders include law enforcement, legal aid programs, and a wide range of social services and governmental agencies that work with the courts and serve many of the same constituents as the courts.

Self-help centers can identify litigants' needs inside the court beyond paperwork and filings. Self-help staff will help a litigant address their need for an interpreter or for an accommodation to address a litigant's disability so that those resources can be scheduled and available prior to the hearing or trial. Self-help attorneys often provide training to court colleagues on updates in the law. In so doing, they can also work with departments to identify ways to serve self-represented litigants more effectively.

Similarly, self-help centers have an important role in saving resources for other justice partners. As one self-help center director reports, the self-help center helps save money in the court and in other government agencies in the community:

> Everyone knows where to send litigants who need help—law enforcement, the domestic violence shelter workers, the clerks, the judges, the probate investigators.

CHAPTER 15: Looking Forward

The $19.1 million annual augmentation provided for self-help expansion has had a significant impact on increasing access to justice and building a system of self-help services that is accessible to self-represented litigants. Self-help centers have developed new services in civil case types that reflect the public's current needs, allows courts to take advantage of technology to provide more and better service to a wider range of the public, and are flexible enough to adapt to challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Expansion funding has provided more services to the people of California. Making the expansion funding permanent will allow the judicial branch to maintain the gains brought about through the self-help expansion in capacity, new case types served, and integration of innovative service delivery methods.

Even at the current expansion level of funding, self-help center users have expressed a need for additional staffing (especially bilingual staff), extended hours, and shorter wait times for appointments and for services.

The pandemic has shown us the need to have a variety of vehicles for delivering self-help services, both in-person and remote. Self-help services had base technology infrastructure in place as a result of the judicial branch's strategic planning for technology and were thus able to quickly begin providing remote services, but remote technology and practice is not fully integrated into the services. Remote services must become a basic service rather than a temporary way to address a crisis. Investment in those services will provide more access and prepare the judicial branch to handle future crises with less disruption, whether due to natural disasters, public health emergencies, or other unexpected events.

Technology pilot projects that are proving successful will need funding to scale up to provide more functionality and scale out so that more courts can offer those services. Online digital services are proving to be especially cost-effective and helpful to self-represented litigants.

Emerging technologies and approaches need to be continually pursued so that self-help centers can adopt new ways to provide information, instruction, and simpler court processes.

Investment in data collection and analytics will help pinpoint areas where self-represented litigants need the most assistance, create new services, improve existing services and processes, and identify where in the judicial process self-help centers can improve and streamline to reduce costs for the court and the court visitor.

Conclusion

The $19.1 augmentation of funding for court-based self-help centers supported both service expansion and innovation. Information technology made it possible to increase the number of litigants served, to reach underserved populations, and to offer a wider range of services. It

created the opportunity to introduce innovations with a goal of providing more efficient and effective services. Technology innovations that supported remote services also proved to be helpful in sustaining service to the public during the public health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. With ongoing funding, the self-help centers will continue efforts to scale up efficiencies and scale out for broader availability.

APPENDIX A: Methodology

A multi-method data collection process was designed in order to address all aspects of the legislative areas of inquiry. This design included the analysis of existing data sources combined with new data collection efforts that included focus groups and interviews with self-help center staff, court administrators, and judges, and a survey of self-help center customers. Starting with new data collections, each data source is described below.

New Data Collections

Customer Satisfaction Survey

For the main in-office study,[230] self-help centers statewide collected customer satisfaction data on in-person services for four days, October 15 through 18, 2019.[231] The study materials and data collection process was first piloted in one large county prior to the statewide data collection in order to identify any potential problems with the survey content or the process for collecting the data.

Prior to the study week in October 2019, webinar training sessions were offered by Judicial Council staff to explain the purpose of the study and the processes for collecting the data. Two training times were offered to self-help staff members and a recording of the webinar was made available to those who were unable to attend the live sessions.

Participants

The goal of the study was to capture data from all self-help center customers who came into the office for assistance during the study week.

Materials

The survey included both a staff and customer response page. Staff provided responses to questions regarding the areas with which customers needed assistance (e.g., child custody, landlord-tenant, guardianship) and the service types that were provided by the center staff (e.g., one-on-one assistance, workshop instruction, etc.).

The customer portion of the survey included open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe what they liked about services and what they thought could be improved, and five Likert-scale questions regarding self-help customers' opinions about the quality and helpfulness of the services and staff. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a six-point scale: *strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree*.

[230] In order to test the survey methods and data collection tools, pilot data was collected in one large county on both in-office and remote services. Data from the pilot county is not included in the analyses due to differences in the data collection tools and protocols.

[231] Four counties collected data during slightly different time periods due to technical or scheduling difficulties (e.g., did not receive packet on time; issues with being closed during fire season).

Procedures

At the time of service completion, staff first completed the front portion of the survey; customers were then handed the survey and asked to complete the questions on the reverse side. In order to ensure participant anonymity, self-help center staff were instructed to allow customers as much privacy as possible to complete the survey. Customers dropped the completed surveys into a drop box, which provided an additional assurance of privacy and anonymity of responses. Surveys were returned to the Judicial Council via postal mail (using prepaid postage labels provided by the Judicial Council).[232]

Remote Focus Group Sessions

Due to the pandemic shelter-in-place orders beginning in March 2020, site visits to courts had to be curtailed. In order to more fully understand responses to survey questions and gain insights on the impact of self-help services on court operations, remote focus groups were held with participants from throughout the state.

Self-Help Center Staff

Five focus groups were conducted online remotely in June and July of 2020 with self-help center staff across the state. The goal was to gather information about issues that arise in the provision of services to different populations or by different methods, as well as to consider the impact of those services on the court. Focus group topics included rural services, workshops and clinics, serving persons with limited English proficiency, videoconferencing and live chat, and settlement services.

Participants

Focus groups ranged in size from five to eight participants per session. A total of 29 individuals from 27 different counties participated in the focus group. One self-help center staff person participated in three groups. All other staff participated in one focus group only.

Materials and Procedures

A series of open-ended discussion questions and polling questions were used to guide the focus group discussions. This allowed researchers to capture both qualitative (open-ended focus group discussion questions, chat comments) and quantitative data (group polls) from the participants. Focus groups were conducted online remotely.

Participants were provided with the focus group questions in advance, in order to allow them to prepare in advance of the discussion. A round-robin interview style was used for the open-ended question, in which each participant was called on to respond to every question. This ensured participation and responses from all participants. In addition, polls were conducted with

[232] Customers receiving assistance via email, the court's self-help website, or other remote service were provided with a link to an online survey to provide feedback about the assistance they had received. For those receiving help on the website, a link to the survey was provided on the webpage. For email assistance and all other remote services, self-help center staff provided customers a survey link and invited them to participate. The number of respondents to this remote survey (88 in nine counties) was insufficient to rely on for this report.

participants to capture quantitative data on services. Participants were also encouraged to enter any additional comments in the chat function during the session; some focus groups received follow-up questions via email to address.

Judicial Officers and Court Staff

Three focus groups were conducted remotely in July 2020 with judges, court, and self-help center staff from 11 courts of different sizes and geography. Counties included Alameda, Los Angeles, Orange, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Ventura, and Yolo. The goal was to discuss the impact of self-help services on other aspects of court operations.

Participants

Focus groups ranged in size from 11 to 12 participants per session. Twelve court operations staff participated, including a court executive officer, a judicial assistant, a Family Court Services director and family law and civil law administrators. Eleven judicial officers and 6 self-help center directors participated.

Materials and Procedures

Participants were surveyed prior to the focus groups to determine their impression of the effectiveness of their self-help centers in impacting the court in ways previously identified through interviews with judges and court staff. A series of open-ended discussion questions were used to guide the focus group discussion. Focus groups were conducted online remotely.

Participants were provided with the focus group questions in advance, in order to allow them to prepare in advance of the discussion. They were also provided with information on case filings and their self-help budget. Some focus group participants were interviewed for further follow-up questions.

Administrative Data Sources

The cost-benefit analysis relies on a number of existing data sources to minimize the impact of additional surveys and data collection on the courts. Each source is described below.

Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey

The Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) is an online platform that allows self-help center/family law facilitator offices to enter basic information about their customers and the services they provided. It allows courts to review reports on services provided and make decisions on how to allocate resources to meet the needs of court operations and to best serve their customers.[233]

[233] STARS information, including the *STARS Handbook,* Version 2.0 (Oct. 2019) and surveys, may be found at www.courts.ca.gov/partners/3673.htm.

The data collection was designed to collect sufficient detail about customer encounters to provide meaningful program information, while at the same time not overburdening court staff with excessive data entry. The result is a hybrid system in which longer encounters of more than five minutes in duration are entered at the encounter level, while those that last five minutes or less are entered as aggregate data. More in-depth reports can be provided for the encounter-level data, for example, by breaking down the type of service by specific case types. However, if courts want to look at overall numbers for program management, such as total encounters during a specific time period, the data can be "rolled up" to a monthly level across all three reports to look at total caseload.

Reporting Tool	Description
Customer Information Survey	Encounter-level data reported for each customer assisted by both the self-help and family law facilitator programs.
Daily Statistics and Workshop Report (Daily Report)	Aggregate data reported on brief encounters that are five minutes or less and workshop statistics.
Monthly Statistics and Workshop Report (Monthly Report)	Aggregate data reported each month on brief encounters that are five minutes or less and workshop statistics.

For purposes of the cost-benefit study, STARS data was "frozen" as of June 11, 2020, for January–December 2019 records, and as of July 6, 2020, for January–June 2020 records.

It is clear that not every encounter is recorded. As one staff director of a small program noted: "We had 30 telephone calls today and 122 drop-ins and were assisting people in court. We were just moving as quickly as we could, and I know that we missed counting some people because we just had so many people to serve." However, it is unlikely that this had any significant effect on findings other than the cost per service may be lower.

Depending on the measure, the statistics cited in the report come from the encounter-level data source: the Customer Information Survey or from a combined dataset that merges data across the Customer Information Survey, Daily Report, and Monthly Report to produce aggregate data representing total customer encounters.

Self-Help Quarterly Reports

For fiscal years 2018–19 and 2019–20, court recipients of California's Self-Help Center Program Grants provided quarterly reports with updates on program resources and services. The quarterly reports include both static data requests to identify changes over time and varied focus topics. Beginning with the fourth quarter of fiscal year 2019–20, the report moved to an online format for more efficient data consistency, enforcement, and data compilation.

For purposes of this cost-benefit study, quarterly report data includes, among other topics, information on case types served, one-on-one services, workshop services, technology utilized, and personnel resources.

Self-Help Grant Applications

Self-help grant applications are provided by the courts on an annual basis. The applications summarize expected program changes and resources required. For purposes of this cost-benefit study, grant application data was used for budgeted program costs by the self-help centers, including personnel. It was also used to track the changes in self-help services from previous years.

Resource Assessment Study

The Judicial Council initially approved a Resource Assessment Study (RAS) model in 2005. The RAS model is a workload allocation model based on case types and counts of court filings and the time to process the filings from initial receipt to case closing. These caseweights and their associated costs are utilized to allocate court resources. Court filings are based on a three-year rolling average; associated costs are updated annually. The model is updated approximately every five years. For purposes of this cost-benefit study, the RAS model was utilized to identify standardized working hours per year and average annual costs for judges and clerks.

Document Assembly Usage Statistics

LHI/HotDocs

Usage statistics are provided by Pro Bono Net each quarter. Key metrics include the number of interviews and documents generated. Data is available at the LawHelp Interactive Resource Center at *www.probono.net/dasupport/*, which requires a password.

Guide & File

Usage statistics are maintained by staff at the Superior Court of Orange County and shared with the Guide & File user group each month. Key metrics captured are number of interviews, number of interviews completed, and number of e-filings.

California Courts Google Analytics

Reports on the usage of the California Courts Online Self-Help Center, Judicial Council online forms, and the "Families Change" webpage were developed using Google Analytics tools. Those reports were reviewed for 2019 and for the first six months of 2020.

Innovation Grant Reports

Recipients of grants from the Judicial Council's Court Innovations Grant Program that were awarded in 2017 provided quarterly reports on the progress of project implementation as well as data collected on the efficacy of the program. Reports from all grants related to self-help activities were reviewed. Follow-up interviews with the self-help center staff at the recipient courts were also conducted to more fully understand the impact of those innovations on the operation of their self-help centers.

Interviews

Numerous interviews were conducted by Judicial Council staff during the self-help expansion period in the course of providing technical assistance and training. These interviews were with self-help center staff, court administrators, and judicial officers.

Judicial Council staff conducted site visits to Alameda, Butte, Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Marin, Orange, Placer, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Ventura, and Yolo courts during the study period to observe self-help center operations.

Additional interviews were conducted with legal services attorneys operating self-help services in the courts, with law librarians and Family Court Services staff to identify partnerships and methods of collaboration.

Weekly videoconference meetings of self-help center staff starting in April 2020 provided invaluable information about the impact of the pandemic and the expansion of remote services.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on the impact of self-help services was conducted, including both published sources and unpublished evaluations provided to the Judicial Council. Assistance was provided by Katherine Alteneder of the Self-Represented Litigation Network and John Greacen of Greacen Associates, LLC, in identifying sources of information.

Data Sources by Chapter

	Client Satisfaction Survey	Focus Groups	STARS	Self-Help Quarterly Reports	Self-Help Grant Applications	Resource Allocation Study	Document Assembly Statistics	Google Analytics	Innovation Grant Reports	Court & Justice Partner Interviews	Literature Review
Executive Summary	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chapter 1 Major Accomplishments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
Chapter 2 Customer Satisfaction	✓										✓
Chapter 3 Triage & Brief Services	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓
Chapter 4 One-on-One Services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
Chapter 5 Workshops	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
Chapter 6 Civil Expansion											
Chapter 7 Language Access	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Chapter 8 Remote Services		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Chapter 9 Document Assembly		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chapter 10 Settlement		✓	✓	✓						✓	✓
Chapter 11 Rural Courts		✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
Chapter 12 Inmate Services			✓	✓						✓	✓
Chapter 13 COVID-19		✓		✓						✓	✓
Chapter 14 Impact on Court Operations		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
Chapter 15 Looking Forward	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

APPENDIX B: Data Tables

List of Tables

Table 1. Calendar Year 2019 Self-Help Encounters by Type of Service

Type of Service	# of Encounters	% of Encounters
Extended One-on-One Services		
In-Person	466,343	46.1
Phone	24,646	2.4
Email	12,599	1.3
Mail	3,178	0.3
Web Portal	2,858	0.3
Videoconferencing	675	0.1
Other Remote	261	0.0
Total Extended One-on-One Services	510,560	50.5
Brief Services		
In-Person	355,847	35.2
Phone	89,077	8.8
Total Brief Services	444,924	44.0
Workshop Participants	55,831	5.5
Total Encounters	**1,011,315**	**100.0**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database, Daily Report Database, and Monthly Report Database; data as of June 11, 2020, based on self-help center reports of services conducted between January 1 and December 31, 2019.

Notes:
1. *Each encounter is counted once, although multiple services may have been provided.*

Table 2. Increase in Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) from 2017 to 2019

	FY 2017–18	FY 2018–19	FY 2019–20
Attorney FTE	57.58	98.51	110.26
Non-Attorney FTE	98.21	175.98	226.03
Total Staff FTE	155.79	274.49	336.29
Total FTE Increase from Base Year FY 2017–18		118.70	180.50
Increase from Base Year FY 2017–18		76%	116%

FY = fiscal year

Source: Self-Help Program Budgets, FY 2017–18, FY 2018–19, and FY 2019–20.

Note: FTE is per submitted program budget.

Table 3. Percent of New Hires Who Are Bilingual

	Bilingual FTEs	Total FTEs	%
Attorney	22.80	52.68	43
Non-Attorney	60.88	127.82	48
Total Staff	83.68	180.50	46

FY = fiscal year, FTE = full-time equivalent

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, Q4 FY 2018–19 and Q1 FY 2019–20 and Self-Help Program Applications, FY 2018–19 and FY 2019–20.

Note: FTE is per submitted program budget.

Table 4. Number of Courts Reporting Expansion from July 2018 through September 2019

	Q1–2 FY 2018–19	Q3 FY 2018–19	Q4 FY 2018–19	Q1 FY 2019–20	Total
Opened or Reopened Space	6	5	2	1	14
Reconfigured Space	4	4	1	1	10
Added Technology Upgrades (Infrastructure)	12	9	1	1	23
Added Hours of Operation	19	0	3	0	22
Added New Case Types	21	8	4	1	34
Added Workshops	25	5	1	1	32
Added User Technology	25	11	6	0	42

Q = quarter, FY = fiscal year

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, FY 2018–19 through Q1 FY 2019–20.

Table 5. Number of Self-Help Centers Adding Topics Served between July 2018 and September 2019

	Q1–2 FY 2018–19	Q3 FY 2018–19	Q4 FY 2018–19	Q1 FY 2019–20	Total
Limited Civil	7	0	1	0	8
Conservatorship	4	3	1	0	8
Guardianship	5	1	2	0	8
Unlawful Detainer	3	3	1	0	7
Consumer Debt	4	1	0	0	5
Adoption	2	2	0	1	5
Small Claims	3	1	0	0	4
Name Change	1	1	1	0	3
Elder Abuse Restraining Order	0	1	2	0	3
Small Estates	1	2	0	0	3
Limited Conservatorship	2	1	0	0	3
Gender Change	1	1	0	0	2
Grandparent Visitation	2	0	0	0	2
Traffic	1	0	1	0	2
Expungement /Record Clearance	1	1	0	0	2
Establish Fact of Birth, Death, Marriage	1	0	0	0	1
Civil Harassment	0	0	1	0	1
General Civil	0	0	1	0	1
Domestic Violence	1	0	0	0	1
Summary Dissolution	0	1	0	0	1
Criminal Restitution	0	0	1	0	1
Breach of Contract	1	0	0	0	1
Total	**40**	**19**	**12**	**1**	**72**

Q = quarter, FY = fiscal year

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, FY 2018–19 through Q1 FY 2019–20.

Table 6. Time Spent on One-on-One Services

Type of Service or Area of Law	Avg. Time Allocated (Minutes)	# Number of Courts Reporting
Walk-ins	23.1	21
Appointments	51.4	16
Probate	76.5	10
Family Law	43.3	10
Civil	39.4	8
Overall Average	43.4	

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, Quarter 4 Fiscal Year 2018–19.

Note: Based on 33 courts that reported at least one protocol for time allocated on one-on-one appointments.

Table 7. Three-Year Comparison of Courts Offering One-On-One Services Only

Fiscal Year	# of Courts	% of All Courts
2015–16	40	69
2018–19	24	41

Source: Fiscal Year 2015–16 Self-Help Program Application and Quarter 4 Fiscal Year 2018–19.

Table 8. Calendar Year 2019 One-on-One, In-Person Encounters by Topic

Case Types	One-on-One In-Person Encounters	Total Encounters	% of Total Encounters
Divorce	158,475	191,497	83
Child Custody and Visitation	142,033	160,875	88
Domestic Violence	35,226	36,844	96
Child Support	34,848	42,098	83
Parentage	29,723	34,929	85
Unlawful Detainer Total	28,859	31,168	93
Unlawful Detainer—Tenant	16,849	18,082	93
Unlawful Detainer—Landlord	12,832	13,918	92
Spousal/Partner Support	26,612	33,472	80
Other Family Law and Adoption	24,909	27,172	92
Small Claims	23,535	37,906	62
Civil Harassment	14,694	15,161	97
Guardianship	11,003	12,814	86
Name Change	6,569	6,976	94
Conservatorship and Limited Conservatorship	2,728	3,181	86
Other Probate	2,518	2,907	87
General Civil	2,478	2,864	87
Other Civil	2,294	2,676	86
Other Case Types	2,193	2,736	80
Elder Abuse Restraining Order	2,094	2,238	94
Consumer Debt	1,954	2,134	92
Other Limited	1,191	1,390	86

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Notes:

1. *One-on-one in-person encounters sum to more than 466,343 because some encounters involved more than one case type.*
2. *Encounters that report both Domestic Violence—Petitioner and Domestic Violence—Respondent are counted only once on this table so will differ slightly from Table 11, which counts Domestic Violence—Petitioner and Domestic Violence—Respondent separately.*
3. *Encounters that report both Civil Harassment—Petitioner and Civil Harassment—Respondent are counted only once on this table so will differ slightly from Table 13, which counts Civil Harassment—Petitioner and Civil Harassment—Respondent separately.*
4. *Other Family Law includes Adoptions, Other Probate includes Probate, and Other Case Types includes Expungements, Traffic and Other. These totals do not match the sum of individual case types shown in Tables 12, 14, and 15 because on this table each encounter is counted only once.*

Table 9. Calendar Year 2019 Number of Small Claims Encounters by Service Type

Service Type	# of Encounters	% of Total Encounters
One-on-One In-Person	23,535	62
Phone	11,772	31
Other	2,599	7
Total	**37,906**	**100**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Table 10. Calendar Year 2019 Self-Help Center One-on-One In-Person and Total Encounters by Area of Law

Area of Law	One-on-One In-Person Encounters	Total Encounters	% of Total
Family Law	345,126	396,098	87.1
Civil	81,399	99,583	81.7
Probate	15,857	18,475	85.8
Other Case Types	2,193	2,736	86.0
Total	**444,575**	**516,892**	

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: This table does not include totals because encounters can be counted more than once across areas of law (but only once within each area) and some encounters are missing area of law data. For a count of encounters, see Table 1.

Table 11. Calendar Year 2019 Topics Addressed in One-on-One, In Person Assistance by Case Type—Family Law

Case Types	Number	% of Total
Divorce	158,475	35.1
Child Custody and Visitation	142,033	31.4
Child Support	34,848	7.7
Parentage	29,723	6.6
Domestic Violence-Petitioner	28,896	6.4
Spousal/Partner Support	26,612	5.9
Other Family Law	24,909	5.5
Domestic Violence-Respondent	6,270	1.4
Total	**451,766**	**100**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: Sums to more than 345,126, the number of Family Law encounters, because encounters may involve more than one case type.

Table 12. Calendar Year 2019 Family Law and Other Case Types by Whether One-on-One, In-Person Customers Previously Visited Self-Help Center

Previously Visited Self-Help Center	Family Law Encounter		Other Case Type Encounter	
	#	%	#	%
Yes	204,073	59	43,402	42
No/Don't Know	141,053	41	59,421	58
Total	**345,126**	**100**	**102,823**	**100**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: One-on-one in-person encounters totaled 466,343; however, 447,949 encounters are reported on this table due to some respondents that did not answer this question.

Table 13. Calendar Year 2019 Topics Addressed in One-on-One, In Person Assistance by Case Type—Civil		
Case Types	**Number**	**% of Total**
Small Claims Plaintiff	21,537	25.4%
Unlawful Detainer—Tenant	16,849	19.9%
Civil Harassment Petitioner	13,419	15.8%
Unlawful Detainer—Landlord	12,832	15.1%
Name Change	6,569	7.8%
General Civil	2,478	2.9%
Other Civil	2,294	2.7%
Elder Abuse Restraining Order	2,094	2.5%
Small Claims Defendant	2,060	2.4%
Consumer Debt	1,954	2.3%
Civil Harassment Respondent	1,451	1.7%
Other Limited Civil	1,191	1.4%
Total	**84,728**	**100.0%**
Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020. *Note: Sums to more than 81,399, the number of Civil encounters, because encounters may involve more than one case type.*		

Table 14. Calendar Year 2019 Topics Addressed in One-on-One, In Person Assistance by Case Type—Probate		
Case Types	**Number**	**% of Total**
Persons Seeking Guardianships	9,676	59.1%
Conservatorship	1,553	9.5%
Persons Objecting to Guardianships	1,374	8.4%
Other Probate	1,326	8.1%
Probate	1,267	7.7%
Limited Conservatorship	1,175	7.2%
Total	**16,371**	**100.0%**
Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020. *Note: Sums to more than 15,857, the number of Other Probate case type encounters, because encounters may involve more than one case type.*		

Table 15. Calendar Year 2019 Topics Addressed in One-on-One, In Person Assistance by Case Type—Other Case Types		
Case Types	**Number**	**% of Total**
Other Miscellaneous	1,009	45.3%
Expungements	883	39.7%
Traffic	334	15.0%
Total	**2,226**	**100.0%**
Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020. *Note: Sums to more than 2,193, the number of other case type encounters, because encounters may involve more than one case type.*		

Table 16. SHARP Tech Connect Courts (22)	
Butte	Modoc
Del Norte	Nevada
Glenn	Placer
Inyo	San Luis Obispo
Imperial	Santa Barbara
Lake	Santa Clara
Lassen	Shasta
Madera	Sierra
Mariposa	Tehama
Mendocino	Trinity
Merced	Tulare
Source: SHARP Tech Connect project team.	

Table 17. Workshop Overview as of June 2019

Metric	Number
Courts Offering Workshops	34
Courts That Expanded Workshop Offerings	32
Courts Using Volunteers or Non-Attorneys to Staff Workshops	11
Workshops Offered in Language Other Than English	68
Spanish	61
Vietnamese	4
Armenian	2
Russian	1
Legal Topics Covered	17
Unique Workshops Developed and Offered	233
Estimated Workshops Offered Per Month	1,118
Estimated Attendees Per Month	6,516
Average Preparation Time (hours)	1.1
Average Workshop Duration (hours)	2.1
Average Total Time Per Workshop (hours)	3.2

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, fiscal year 2018–19 through Quarter 1 fiscal year 2019–20.

Note: Reports are as of June 2019, except for "Courts That Expanded Workshop Offerings," which is as of September 2019.

Table 18. Monthly Count of Workshops Held and Number of Attendees as of June 2019			
Legal Topic	**Workshops Per Month**	**Attendees Per Month**	**% of Total**
Dissolution	525	3,635.8	14.4%
Parentage	132	671.2	19.7%
Unlawful Detainer	91	243.3	37.4%
Guardianship	72	464.1	15.5%
Request for Order	64	454.4	14.1%
Child Support	49	82.3	59.5%
Restraining Order	48	169.5	28.3%
Small Claims	47	175.8	26.7%
Child Custody	38	386.7	9.8%
Complex Service of Process	30	122.9	24.4%
Conservatorship	6	27.0	22.2%
Probate Notes and Accountings	4	30.4	13.2%
Hague	4	14.0	28.6%
Consumer Debt	3	18.0	16.7%
Step-Parent Adoption	2	8.0	25.0%
Expungement/Clearing Criminal Records	2	10.0	20.0%
Collecting Money Judgments	1	3.0	33.3%
Total	**1,118**	**6,516.4**	**17.2%**
Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, Quarter 4 fiscal year 2018–19.			

Table 19. Average Duration and Preparation Time by Workshop Topic as of June 2019

Legal Topic	Workshop Duration (Hours)	Workshop Prep Time (Hours)	Average of Duration + Prep Time (Hours)
Child Custody	1.95	0.68	2.63
Child Support	1.88	0.90	2.78
Collecting Money Judgments	1.00	0.08	1.08
Complex Service of Process	3.13	1.15	4.27
Conservatorship	2.67	3.08	5.75
Consumer Debt	1.50	1.17	2.67
Dissolution	2.90	1.04	3.69
Expungement/Clearing Criminal Records	0.83	0.50	0.92
Guardianship	2.43	0.46	2.57
Hague	3.50	2.50	6.00
Parentage	3.25	0.87	3.83
Probate Notes and Accountings	2.00	4.00	6.00
Request for Order	1.91	0.28	1.72
Restraining Order	1.31	0.69	2.00
Small Claims	1.53	0.33	1.86
Unlawful Detainer	1.72	0.60	2.32

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, Quarter 4 fiscal year 2018–19.

Table 20. Challenges with Workshops Reported as of June 2019

Challenge	# of Courts Reporting	% of Courts Providing Workshops
No-shows	15	44
Not enough volume for some case types	15	44
Problems getting people to attend	12	35
Concern regarding sharing information in public	3	9
Other	9	26

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, Quarter 4 fiscal year 2018–19.

Note: 34 courts reporting.

Table 21. Calendar Year 2019 Number of Extended Encounters Delivered With Remote Services (With Message Board Adjustment)

Type of Service	# of Encounters	% of Total
Telephone	24,646	51.5
Mail	3,178	6.6
Message Board	3,700	7.7
Email	12,599	26.3
Web Portal	2,858	6.0
Videoconferencing	675	1.4
Other	168	0.4
Total	**47,824**	**100.0**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020. Message Board data was added to this analysis.

Notes:

1. *Total Encounters does not match Table 1 because Message Board data was reported via Quarterly Reports.*
2. *"Other" includes texting, live chat, and other remote services.*

Table 22. Ten-Year Growth in LHI/HotDocs Use (Number of Interviews)

Calendar Year	Number of Interviews
2010	49,027
2011	57,852
2012	69,476
2013	86,368
2014	81,261
2015	96,328
2016	111,239
2017	157,251
2018	187,122
2019	206,845

Source: LawHelp Interactive Resource Center National Usage Reports, www.probono.net/dasupport/ *(password protected).*

Table 23. Calendar Year 2019 LHI/HotDocs Form Sets and Interviews by Area of Law

Programs	# of Interviews	# of Form Sets Generated
Name Change	48,883	22,336
Domestic Violence	45,448	26,443
Divorce	39,537	26,210
Parentage	15,117	10,903
Civil Harassment	14,233	9,333
Custody and Support Request for Order	12,099	9,376
Conservatorship	9,750	5,161
Guardianship	9,660	4,856
Unlawful Detainer	6,173	4,487
Elder Abuse	1,462	864
Posting and Publication	1,401	968
Trial Readiness	1,088	1,025
Fee Waiver	876	508
Consumer Debt	663	265
Income and Expense Declaration	333	254
Governmental Child Support	122	25
Total	**206,845**	**123,014**

Source: LawHelp Interactive Resource Center National Usage Reports, www.probono.net/dasupport/ *(password protected).*

Table 24. Change in LHI/HotDocs Usage (Interviews) Between Calendar Years 2017 and 2019

Calendar Year	# of Interviews	# of Form Sets Generated	% Change
2017	157,251	99,522	24
2019	206,845	123,014	32

Source: LawHelp Interactive Resource Center National Usage Reports, www.probono.net/dasupport/ *(password protected).*

Note: The time periods included are January 1, 2017–December 31, 2017 compared to January 1, 2019–December 31, 2019.

Table 25. Calendar Year 2019 Guide & File Completed Interviews and Forms Sets Electronically Filed

Programs	Completed Interviews	Electronically Filed
Civil Harassment Petition	319	55
Amended Dissolution Petition	80	11
Dissolution—Initial	2,193	727
Dissolution—Response	237	100
Domestic Violence	492	53
Elder Abuse Restraining Order	49	1
Unlawful Detainer	248	9
Income and Expense Declaration	310	104
Notice of Change of Address	139	1
Guardianship	241	41
Parentage	704	120
Request for Order	876	214
Proof of Service—Summons	84	13
Limited Conservatorship	167	31
Small Claims	1,371	706
Total	**7,510**	**2,186**

Source: Internal report provided by Guide & File project team, December 2019.

Table 26. Calendar Year 2019 Settlement Assistance by Area of Law

Area of Law	# of Encounters	% of Total
Family Law	8,678	89.5
Civil Law		
Unlawful Detainer	826	8.5
Civil Harassment	125	1.3
Other	43	0.4
Total Civil Law	994	10.3
Probate	9	0.1
Multiple Areas of Law	16	0.2
Total	**9,697**	**100.0**

Source: Customer Information Database, data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: Settlement assistance encounters are reported as one-on-one encounters in Table 1.

Table 27. List of 37 Small Courts

Alpine	Modoc
Amador	Mono
Butte	Napa
Calaveras	Nevada
Colusa	Placer
Del Norte	Plumas
El Dorado	San Benito
Glenn	San Luis Obispo
Humboldt	Santa Cruz
Imperial	Shasta
Inyo	Sierra
Kings	Siskiyou
Lake	Sutter
Lassen	Tehama
Madera	Trinity
Marin	Tuolumne
Mariposa	Yolo
Mendocino	Yuba
Merced	

Source: Judicial Council of California, courts designated cluster 1 and cluster 2 (small courts).

Table 28. Calendar Year 2019 Customer Encounters by Small Court Designation

Court Designation	# of Encounters	% of Total
Small Courts	244,648	24
Non Small Court	766,667	76
Total	**1,011,315**	**100**

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database, Daily Report Database, and Monthly Report Database; data as of June 11, 2020, and Quarterly Reports.

Table 29. Calendar Year 2019—Small Court Customer Has Previously Been to Self-Help Center

	Small		Not Small		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Yes	69,867	64	212,535	51	282,402	54
No	36,431	33	166,946	40	203,377	39
Customer doesn't know	1,538	1	13,979	3	15,517	3
Missing	1,100	1	23,664	6	24,764	5
Total	**108,936**	**100**	**417,124**	**100**	**526,060**	**100**

Source: STARS Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Table 30. Number of Language Assistance Services Added From June 2018 Through September 2019

	Q1–2 FY 2018–19	Q3 FY 2018–19	Q4 FY 2018–19	Q1 FY 2019–20	Total
Services in Spanish	9	10	2	4	25
Telephone interpretation	2	2	2	1	7
Services in other language	2	8	2	0	12
Other language service	1	1	0	0	2
Total	**13**	**20**	**6**	**5**	**44**

Q = quarter, FY = fiscal year

Source: Self-Help Quarterly Reports, FY 2018–19 through Q1 FY 2019–20.

Table 31. Calendar Year 2019 Encounters in Language Other Than English

Language Most Comfortable Speaking	Service Provided in English		Service Provided in Language Other Than English		Total
	#	%	#	%	Row Total
Did not indicate	14,959	100	42	0	15,001
English	424,899	100	1,870	0	426,769
Spanish	41,206	55	33,833	45	75,039
Filipino/Tagalog	831	89	103	11	934
Chinese/Mandarin & Chinese/Cantonese	1,664	80	420	20	2,084
Vietnamese	1,006	79	269	21	1,275
Arabic	602	90	68	10	670
Other Language	3,682	86	606	14	4,288
Total	**488,849**	**93**	**37,211**	**7**	**526,060**

Source: STARS Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Table 32. Calendar Year 2019—Customer Looked Online Before Coming to Self-Help Center, by Language Most Comfortable Speaking

	Customer Is Most Comfortable Speaking Spanish		Customer Is Most Comfortable Speaking English	
	#	%	#	%
Did not indicate	2,845	4	18,821	4
Customer Doesn't Know	2,636	4	16,122	4
No	61,008	81	263,892	62
Yes	8,550	11	127,934	30
Total	**75,039**	**100**	**426,769**	**100**

Source: STARS Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: Customers most comfortable speaking other languages are not included in this table.

Table 33. Closure Status of Self Help Centers at Beginning of COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary	March 16, 2020	March 24, 2020
Closed	5	25
Open	53	3
Limited	0	30
Total	**58**	**58**
% Open/Limited	**91%**	**57%**

Source: Weekly court call.

Table 34. Comparison of Civil Encounters Between Calendar Years 2018 and 2019

	2018	2019	% Increase
Number of Encounters	31,884	99,538	212

Source: Customer Information Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: The time periods included are January 1, 2018–December 31, 2018, compared to January 1, 2019–December 31, 2019.

Table 35. Unlawful Detainer Encounters Compared to Filings in January–June 2018 and January–June 2019

	Number of Encounters	Number of Filings	Encounters as % of Filings
January–June 2018	5,430	66,468	8
January–June 2019	13,775	61,930	22

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database, data as of April 3, 2020;, and Judicial Branch Statistical Information System (JBSIS), data as of May 15, 2020.

Table 36. Courts Represented in Self-Help Center Focus Groups, June–July 2020

1. Alameda
2. Butte
3. Calaveras
4. Contra Costa
5. Fresno
6. Humboldt
7. Imperial
8. Inyo
9. Kern
10. Kings
11. Lake
12. Los Angeles
13. Marin
14. Mono
15. Orange
16. Placer
17. Riverside
18. Sacramento
19. San Benito
20. San Bernardino
21. San Diego
22. San Francisco
23. San Joaquin
24. San Luis Obispo
25. San Mateo
26. Santa Clara
27. Santa Cruz
28. Shasta
29. Tulare
30. Ventura
31. Yolo

Source: Judicial Council of California.

Table 37. Calendar Year 2019 Number of Orders After Hearing and Courtroom Encounters

	Number of Encounters
Orders After Hearing	40,052
Courtroom	55,486

Source: Self-Help Tracking and Reporting Survey (STARS) Customer Information Database, Daily Report Database, and Monthly Report Database; data as of June 11, 2020.

Note: Courtroom includes both extended and brief encounters.

Table 38. Calendar Year 2019 "Families Change" User Statistics

Metric	Number
Users	52,252
Sessions	61,549

Source: "Families Change" California Website Statistics 2019–2020, June 30, 2020, Justice Education Society.

Table 39. Calendar Year 2019 "Families Change" Top 15 Page Visits

Page URL (English)	Guides	Pageviews
1. /en/parents/parent-guide	Parents	14,445
2. /en/parents/child-support	Parents	9,379
3. /en/parents/how-do-we-calculate-amount-child-support	Parents	4,962
4. /en/kids	Kids	4,464
5. /en/parents/what-child-support	Parents	2,243
6. /en/teens	Teens	2,136
7. /en/parents/what-if-we-don't-agree-amount-child-support	Parents	2,053
8. /en/kids/law	Kids	1,640
9. /en/parents/are-there-exceptions-how-much-parent-has-pay	Parents	1,575
10. /en/parents/resources	Parents	1,569
11. /en/kids/intro	Kids	1,462
12. /en/parents/dealing-change	Parents	1,249
13. /en/kids/changeville/	Kids	1,111
14. /en/kids/feelings	Kids	1,047
15. /en/parents/telling-children	Parents	1,039

Source: "Families Change" California Website Statistics 2019–2020, June 30, 2020, Justice Education Society.

Table 40. Calendar Year 2019 "California Courts" User Statistics

Metric	Number
Users browsing in English	4,649,755
Users browsing in Spanish	637,817

Source: Judicial Council, Internal Web Analytics Reports, data as of June 2020.

Table 41. Calendar Year 2019 "California Courts Online Self-Help Center" Top Page Visits

Page Title	Page URL	Pageviews
Self-Help-selfhelp	/selfhelp.htm	424,918
Filing for Divorce or Separation-divorce_or_separation_selfhelp	/1033.htm	345,589
Divorce or Separation-divorce_or_separation_selfhelp	/selfhelp-divorce.htm	332,418
Traffic-traffic_selfhelp	/selfhelp-traffic.htm	291,416
Traffic & Ticket Basics-traffic_selfhelp	/8452.htm	269,781
Payment of Bail / Fines-traffic_selfhelp	/9581.htm	251,226
File a Petition to Change Your Name-name_change_selfhelp	/22489.htm	229,117
Small Claims-small_claims_selfhelp	/selfhelp-smallclaims.htm	214,355
Change an Adult's Name-name_change_selfhelp	/1051.htm	188,691
Filing Your Case-divorce_or_separation_selfhelp	/1229.htm	183,510
Forms-divorce_or_separation_selfhelp	/1230.htm	183,003
Custody & Parenting Time (Visitation)-custody_famlaw_selfhelp	/selfhelp-custody.htm	178,703
Suing Someone-small_claims_selfhelp	/1007.htm	152,192
Name Change-name_change_selfhelp	/selfhelp-namechange.htm	147,858
Fee Waivers-getting_started_selfhelp	/selfhelp-feewaiver.htm	147,418
Security Deposits-housing_selfhelp	/1049.htm	145,826
Correctable Violations ("Fix-It" Tickets)-traffic_selfhelp	/9529.htm	145,725
Asking for a Custody Order-custody_famlaw_selfhelp	/1185.htm	141,086
Civil Harassment-abuse_selfhelp	/1044.htm	129,338
Prepare for Filing Your Case-divorce_or_separation_selfhelp	/1228.htm	128,897
Eviction-eviction_housing_selfhelp	/selfhelp-eviction.htm	124,360

Source: Judicial Council, Internal Web Analytics Reports, data as of June 2020.

Table 42. Customer Satisfaction: Area of Law Where Respondents Sought Help

	Number	% of Respondents (N=6,821)
Family Law	4,231	62.0
Civil	1,460	21.4
Probate	289	4.2
Other	357	5.2
Area of Law not indicated	661	9.6

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Note: Percentages do not total to 100%, as a few customers received help in more than one area.

Table 43. Overall Customer Satisfaction

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
Overall, I am satisfied with the services I received	87.6% (N=5,973)	8.7% (N=595)	1.3% (N=88)	0.3% (N=19)	0.3% (N=20)	1.0% (N=67)	0.9% (N=59)

N = the number of respondents who selected each point on the rating scale.

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Table 44. Customer Satisfaction With Self-Help Staff

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
The staff treated me with respect	91.0% (N=6,207)	6.7% (N=460)	0.4% (N=29)	0.2% (N=12)	0.1% (N=10)	0.8% (N=55)	0.7% (N=48)
The staff explained things to me clearly	88.4% (N=6,027)	8.2% (N=560)	1.2% (N=80)	0.2% (N=14)	0.2% (N=17)	0.8% (N=52)	1.0% (N=71)

N = the number of respondents who selected each point on the rating scale

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Table 45. Customer Satisfaction With Information

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Did Not Answer
I received the information I needed	87.2% (N=5,945)	8.9% (N=609)	1.6% (N=110)	0.2% (N=17)	0.2% (N=14)	0.9% (N=63)	0.9% (N=63)
I know what I need to do next	84.1% (N=5,739)	10.5% (N=719)	2.3% (N=157)	0.4% (N=27)	0.2% (N=16)	0.9% (N=60)	1.5% (N=103)

N = the number of respondents that selected each point on the rating scale.

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Table 46. Customer Satisfaction With Services by Survey Language

	English (N=5,710)	Spanish (N=1,111)
The staff treated me with respect	98.1% (x=5.88)	96.2% (x=5.85)
The staff explained things to me clearly	96.8% (x=5.84)	95.3% (x=5.84)
I received the information I needed	96.2% (x=5.82)	95.4% (x=5.81)
I know what I need to do next	95.0% (x=5.78)	93.0% (x=5.78)
Overall, I am satisfied with the services I received	96.5% (x=5.82)	95.1% (x=5.81)

N = number of respondents
x = average score on a 1 to 6 scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Table 47. Customer Satisfaction by Case Type

	Family Law (N=4,251)	Civil Law (N=1,460)	Probate Law (N=286)
The staff treated me with respect	97.7% (x=5.88)	97.4% (x=5.85)	97.2% (x=5.86)
The staff explained things to me clearly	96.7% (x=5.84)	96.3% (x=5.82)	95.5% (x=5.81)
I received the information I needed	96.2% (X=5.82)	96.2% (x=5.81)	95.1% (x=5.81)
I know what I need to do next	94.4% (x=5.78)	94.7% (x=5.77)	95.5% (x=5.80)
Overall, I am satisfied with the services I received	96.2% (x=5.81)	96.1% (x=5.80)	96.8% (x=5.82)

N = number of respondents
x = average score on a 1 to 6 scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.

Table 48. Customer Satisfaction by Type of Service

	One-on-One Services (N=3,845)	Workshops (N=489)	Triage Services + Another Service (N=1,168)	Triage Only (N=908)
The staff treated me with respect	98.8% (x=5.89)	98.8% (x=5.90)	98.3% (x=5.88)	96.9% (x=5.81)
The staff explained things to me clearly	97.1% (x=5.86)	98.1% (x=5.88)	97.4% (x=5.84)	95.1% (x=5.77)
I received the information I needed	96.7% (x=5.83)	97.3% (x=5.86)	96.5% (x=5.81)	94.2% (x=5.73)
I know what I need to do next	95.2% (x=5.80)	93.1% (x=5.80)	94.3% (x=5.76)	92.7% (x=5.70)
Overall, I am satisfied with the services I received	96.9% (x=5.83)	97.1% (x=5.86)	96.8% (x=5.82)	93.8% (x=5.72)

N = number of respondents
x = average score on a 1 to 6 scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree

Source: Judicial Council Survey of Customer Satisfaction, October 2019.