



Court Help Program Update

Fall 2013

The following summarizes the operations of the Court Help Program of the Montana Supreme Court. The Court Help Program is designed to better meet the legal needs of Montana citizens through assisting self represented litigants and enhancing pro bono opportunities.

Court Help Program Self Help Law Centers assist Montanans in acquiring legal information and resources to meet their legal needs. In addition to directing customers to attorney and agency referral resources, the Court Help Program is equipped to provide legal forms and assist self-represented litigants in successfully filing court documents. The Court Help Program Self Help Law Centers have served Montanans on over 8,023 occasions since January 2013. Approximately eighty two percent of self help customers are seeking assistance in a family law or child support matter. Eighty nine percent of customers indicate they are seeking legal forms or instructional information while approximately 810 visits were for attorney referral resources. Approximately fifty three percent of self help customers report an income equal or less than the federal poverty threshold.

Court Help Program Summit

The Court Help Program relies almost exclusively on remote coordination. However, due to two more years of funding from the 2013 Legislature, this summer, Court Help staff met in person for strategic planning. The result? Great ideas on improving our service model including the development of a Court Help Policy and Procedures Manual. The first draft of the Policy and Procedures Manual was utilized in AmeriCorps training this fall and will continue to be developed throughout the year. The Court Help Policy and Procedures Manual will assist in streamlining our program training and provide continuity and structure to the program. Pictured here are our 2013 Court Help Summit participants, many of whom are outgoing AmeriCorps featured in our summer 2012 program update.



Top section (left to right):
Patty Fain, *Pro Bono Coordinator*
Amy Green, *Bozeman Self Help Law Center*
Isaac Ho, *State Law Library Self Help Law Center*
Kyle Nettleblad, *Cascade County Self Help Law Center*
Sheri Taylor, *Missoula Self Help Law Facilitator*
Linda Frank, *Flathead Self Help Law Facilitator*
Beth Baker, *Montana Supreme Court*
Sarah Garcia, *Court Services Director*
Becky Bird, *Yellowstone District Court Administrator*

Bottom section: (left to right) Kate Seaton, *Cascade County Self Help Law Center*; Erin Farris, *Court Help Program Administrator*; Susan Lupton, *State Law Reference Librarian*; Emily Gutierrez, *Flathead County Self Help Law Center*; Kaileen Balzano, *Yellowstone County Self Help Law Center*; Patt Leikam, *Yellowstone Self Help Law Facilitator*; and (center) Chris Cioffi, *Self Help Vista*.

Court Help Welcomes a New Team!



As the seasons change, so does the make-up of our self help law center service team. On September 10, 2013, Chief Justice McGrath swore in four new AmeriCorps service members: Nolan Harris, of Ronan, is serving at our State Law Library Self Help Law Center. Rochelle Harris, of Whitefish, has joined our re-enrolling service member, Kyle Nettleblad, in Cascade County; Anna Chithelen of New York, has begun serving in Yellowstone County; and Rachel Wagner joined the Gallatin County Self Help Law Center after serving an AmeriCorps term with a partnering organization, the Center for Children and Families. New and returning members took part in 40 hours of training in Helena and the Missoula Self Help

Law Center. Special thanks to Cindy Thiel and staff at the Boone Karlberg Law Firm for their graciousness in hosting our training this year!

Pro Bono Spotlight

GALLATIN LEGAL ASSISTANCE CLINIC (GLAC) LANDS IN BOZEMAN

A couple of years ago, Forbes named Bozeman as the third fastest growing small town in the country – right below The Villages, Florida and barely beating out Palm Coast, Florida. Earlier this year, Montana State University economists crowned Bozeman Montana’s fastest growing city. Gallatin County’s 93,000 residents boast a median income almost 15 percent higher than the state average. In the middle of another construction boom, housing prices have risen nearly 10 percent more than the national average. No surprise then that Bozeman is the most expensive place to live in Big Sky Country.

In startling contrast, while Gallatin County’s poverty rate is below the state average at about 13 percent, the rate of poverty in Bozeman proper is a whopping 20 percent¹ and skyrockets to 48 percent among families with female head-of-the-household with children.

Like elsewhere in the state, Gallatin County courts peddle fast to keep up with ever increasing caseloads. Also like its counterparts, the 18th Judicial District Court sees a proportionately large number of family law related cases – more than 700 in 2012 alone. By most estimates, about 60 percent of family law cases involve one or more self-represented litigants. That’s at least 400 real people – probably many more – navigating the legal terrain of what is likely one of the most life-altering events of their lives and without the help of a lawyer. For those without the financial resources, going it alone may be the only choice. Since opening its doors in 2008, the [Bozeman Self Help Law Center](#) has helped hundreds and hundreds of people locate resources and information as well as find and complete forms. But there are many who need the advice and guidance of an attorney to make the correct legal choices and decisions about their lives and the lives of their children – something a Self Help Center can’t do. Bozeman has long had a pro bono program facilitated by Court Administrator, Jan Bjork. However, full case pro bono representation isn’t always needed – and despite valiant efforts by Ms. Bjork, isn’t always available.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey

This is where Pam Poon makes her extraordinary entrance. Pam, a Bozeman attorney and member of the [State Bar of Montana Justice Initiatives Committee](#), recognized the increasing unmet need in the family law arena and decided to do something about it. Gathering other interested members of Bozeman's local Bar, Pam formed the [Gallatin County Pro Bono Working Group](#). And work they did. Over the course of almost a year, the group met, researched and discussed; met some more and developed the Gallatin Legal Assistance Clinic (GLAC). GLAC is designed to provide legal assistance and advice to low-income Gallatin County residents through local volunteer attorneys. The inaugural by-appointment-only clinic is scheduled for November 20, 2013. GLAC has the remarkable endorsement of the 18th Judicial District Court judges who penned a letter of support ([read the letter here](#)). GLAC will work with the local Self Help Law Center, Montana Legal Services Association and the local Bar to direct those financially eligible to the Clinic when the assistance of a lawyer is essential. In order to support attorney volunteers, GLAC sponsored a free family law CLE on October 21st. Thanks to the hard work of the Working Group and presenters (the legendary) Klaus Sitte, Pam Poon, and Kelly Erickson (HAVEN), a standing room only success!

This isn't just a big deal in the access to justice world, but to Gallatin County and to our state. GLAC's brochure cover aptly states: "Improving our community by improving access to justice". The building of GLAC took some very heavy lifting with strictly volunteer labor and more than a little ingenuity and tenaciousness. It took a dedicated group of people lead by a fearless guide, together with the ever-important support of the judiciary and Bar, to build GLAC and open its doors. The lives of many will be eased by your efforts far into the future. Salute.

Know of someone who could use the assistance of GLAC? Have them call 406-543-8343, Extension 207 for screening and appointment scheduling. [Click here](#) to read or download the GLAC brochure.

Montana Supreme Court Recognized...

This year, the State Bar of Montana awarded two outstanding members of the Judiciary for their contribution to the access to justice in Montana.



Honorable Beth Baker of the Montana Supreme Court received the Karla M. Gray Equal Justice Award. As stated by Judy Meadows in one of Justice Baker's nominating letters, **"Justice Baker's commitment to access to justice for all Montanans and her passion for making equality under the law a reality make her an outstanding candidate for this award."** This award is named after former Chief Justice Karla Gray, founder of the Court Help Program. We are extremely proud to have Justice Baker's ongoing support. Beth is pictured here receiving her award from 2013 State Bar President, Pam Bailey.

Beth McLaughlin, Supreme Court Administrator, was also recognized for distinguished service by the State Bar Justice Initiatives Committee. Beth received this award because of her support for access to justice in Montana. Janice Doggett, Equal Justice Coordinator for the State Bar explained, **"Beth is not afraid to help the effort in any way she can--through heavy lifting or guiding public policy."** The Court Help Program is lucky to have institutional support within the Court Administrator's Office. Beth is pictured here receiving her award from 2013 State Bar President, Pam Bailey.

