



Court Help Program Update

January 2012

The following summarizes the operations of Court Help Program of the Montana Supreme Court. In total, the Court Help Program has served Montanans on more than 1,200 occasions since October 1, 2011.

What's Going On ...

The Court Help Program operates six Self Help Law Centers located throughout the State. Centers are located in Flathead, Missoula, Gallatin, Cascade, Lewis and Clark, and Yellowstone counties. Flathead, Missoula, and Yellowstone county centers are staffed by full time Self Help Law Center facilitators. The Gallatin County Self Help Center is staffed by a part time staff member. The State Law Library Reference Librarian also supervises operations at the State Law Library Self Help Center.



Pictured here are the AmeriCorps Service Members at September training.

In addition to center staff, the Governor's Office of Community Service has awarded the Court Help Program six AmeriCorps Service Members. This September, AmeriCorps Service Members took part in a week of training in Helena and three additional days of training with long-time Self Help Law Center Facilitator, Patt Leikam, in the Billings Self Help Law Center. AmeriCorps members staff the Centers as well as provide phone and direct service to surrounding counties.

Counties receiving direct service include: Beaverhead, Madison, Jefferson, Deer Lodge, Granite, Powell, Lincoln, Glacier, Pondera, Teton, Toole, Hill, Phillips, Valley, Dawson, Custer, Rosebud, and Park. As an attempt to provide quicker access to self help materials, the Court Help Program has created "Self Help Law Stations" in a few of these counties. For an updated summary of Center locations and hours, you may check the web page: <http://courts.mt.gov/selfhelp/default.mcp>.

During 2011, the Court Help Program further defined self help services and developed new performance measures to demonstrate how the Court Help Program impacts court efficiency.

Defining Self Help Services ...

In the past, phone-in or walk-in customers were welcomed and provided legal information available at any stage in the litigation process. Through county courthouse materials and other community organizations, the Court Help Program is now actively encouraging self represented litigants to visit the Center before filing on their own. The program is prepared to print forms approved by the Commission on Self-Represented Litigants, answer questions regarding the purpose and content of the forms, and review forms before filing to

ensure all requirements are met in the respective county. Although the Court Help Program cannot provide litigants with legal advice, center staff can help litigants avoid many of the non legal challenges self represented litigants face during the filing process. Direct communication between court staff and the Court Help Program has enabled Court Help staff to quickly learn statewide and county specific requirements.

New Performance Measures...

The Court Help Program has implemented two new performance measures to demonstrate the effect of the Court Help Program on court efficiency. One performance measure evaluates the service from the perspective of Self Help Law customers. The second measure evaluates the effectiveness of the program from the perspective of court staff. We anticipate the new performance measures will demonstrate how the Court Help program equips self represented litigants with information helpful in navigating the court system quickly and more effectively.

The Court Help Program has also played an integral role in statewide access to justice projects. Program staff is working with Montana Legal Services Association to produce a video entitled "How to Represent Yourself." The video will educate viewers on self representation and provide basic tips, ranging from how to best prepare for a hearing to appropriate dress. The video was filmed in December and will be available online and for check out at local libraries this spring. Special thanks to all of the judges who collaborated on the creation and accuracy of this film!

The Court Help Program is also taking an active role in updating, revising, and creating self representation forms. In 2011, the Court contracted with Montana Legal Services Association for the review of family law forms, with a focus on complying with the new privacy rules. The Court Help Program has also been working with the Commission on Self-Represented Litigants in order to streamline form revisions and work towards developing much needed forms. Feedback regarding form revisions is always very helpful. Feel free to send your comments to efarris@mt.gov.



Pro Bono Spotlight



Montana Attorneys Helping Montana Veterans...

Veterans Stand Downs follow the tradition that in times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative security and safety. At secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends in a safe environment.

Today, Stand Down refers to a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help veterans (many who are homeless or near homeless) to "combat" life on the streets. Veterans are brought together in a single location and provided access to community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives.

Although formalized Stand Downs are not entirely new to Montana, the organized effort to provide on-site services by legal providers is. The Bozeman Stand Down effort in June was the first of its kind in bringing together the combination of the Self Help Law Program in providing legal information and resources while pro bono attorneys were available to provide legal advice and begin the process of getting our veterans the

much needed legal assistance they need. Similar efforts were repeated at Stand Downs in Helena, Great Falls and Billings during the fall months. Additional locations will be added in 2012.

The added benefit of these Stand Downs is to extend services beyond the Stand Down itself. Screening and legal assessments performed by attorneys at the Stand Downs allow us to direct veterans to additional or more comprehensive legal programs, assistance and in some cases, legal representation. A compelling example is the young soldier who attended the Stand Down in Billings with his small sons in tow. After enduring his third tour of duty in Iraq, he returned home to financial difficulties and no job. Trying to readjust to civilian life after years of challenges most of us cannot fathom was difficult enough. Mounting bills and little income only made it worse. After a visit to the legal clinic at a Stand Down, the veteran received advice about his immediate needs and was referred to a pro bono attorney who helped him with his creditor issues. He called to say how the day of the Stand Down had changed his life, and perhaps more importantly, reassured him his sacrifices were acknowledged and appreciated. I know no better definition of a successful effort.

Pro Bono Program Co-Sponsors Veterans Law CLE...

As a follow-up to 2009 joint effort of the Court's Pro Bono Program and The University of Montana School of Law veterans law CLE, the two entities will once again co-sponsor a Veterans Law CLE in January 17th, 2012 at the Law School. The CLE is free to attorneys and will be broadcast live to six courthouse sites across Montana. The hope is the effort will increase the ranks of Montana attorneys who volunteer their services to our veterans in cases before the Board of Veterans Affairs (BVA) through the Court's Montana Attorneys for Montana Veterans (MAMV) pro bono program. To learn more about the CLE or to register, visit <http://www.umt.edu/law/> or contact Patty Fain at (406) 794-7824.

Meet Rachel!



Pictured: Rachel and Stefan of the Flathead County Self Help Law Center

My name is Rachel Payne and I was hired to facilitate the Flathead County Self Help Law Center in August, 2011. I am native to Montana. I grew up in Sanders County and, in 2008, moved to the Flathead Valley to become a Legal Assistant for the Office of the State Public Defender.

At the start of my employment, the Center was open for walk-in customers for four hours, one day a week. Since that time, with the help of Stefan Kolis, our AmeriCorps Service Member, and Bonnie Olson, Flathead County Court Administrator, the Center expanded its walk-in hours to more than six hours a day, four days a week, and one day a month in Lincoln County. We are very proud that since September, 2011, we have served over 300 people!

What's Next ...

Court Help Program goals for the New Year include the development of statewide protocol for the delivery of phone services as well as the development of a statewide community resources guide for program staff and customer referrals.

Contact Information:

Self Help Programs

Erin Farris
efarris@mt.gov
(406) 841-2975

Pro Bono Programs

Patty Fain
PFain@mt.gov
(406) 794-7824