



Court Help Program Update

Summer 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 4,900 occasions since January 2013. Approximately eighty two percent of self help customers are seeking assistance in a family law matter. Ninety percent of customers indicate they are seeking legal forms or instructional information while approximately 473 visits were for attorney referral resources.

New Court Help Website...

This spring, the Montana Supreme Court launched a new website with the goal of providing information more effectively to the public. Court Help Program information includes an interactive map with center hours and services by location. From the main page, follow the "Represent Yourself" menu and click on "Find a Self Help Law Center Near You!" Information on local pro bono programs as well as pro bono resources for attorneys can be found under the "Legal Community" option on the main page.

New! Also available at the bottom of each service location summary are resource guides prepared by county. These resource guides were created and updated by the Justice For Montanans AmeriCorps Service Members service years 2011-2013. Please review the resource guide for your county and let us know if you have additional comments regarding referral resources in your area!



New Court Help Kiosks...

The Court Help Program continues to partner with Montana Legal Services Association and local libraries to expand services in communities outside our full-time center locations. As part of our 2013 Kiosk expansion effort, we are setting up Court Help Kiosks in Park, Dawson, and Hill counties. These locations are currently being served on an appointment only basis and provision of the kiosk will streamline our service to community members by increasing availability of forms and information.



Pro Bono Spotlight



Pro Bono on the Prairie

he thought so too. Fergus, Judith Basin and Petroleum counties make up the 10th Judicial District while neighboring Meagher, Musselshell, Golden Valley and Wheatland counties make up the 14th. Most would pause in learning that in some counties, as many as 21 percent of its people live at or below the federal poverty level – well above the state average. And its population is aging. About 23 percent of the folks in these Judith Basin counties are over 65; in one county, 22 percent of this aging population is living in poverty.

You might also be surprised that there are exactly 25 lawyers servicing the 15,000 square miles and combined population of 40,000 comprising these counties. In Montana, on average there is one attorney for every 293 people living here. But in these counties collectively, there is one attorney for every 1,600 people. If you can afford to hire an attorney, you can probably afford to travel to one of the more “urban” locations where lawyers are plentiful. But if you are poor and need legal assistance, there aren’t a lot of options on the table. That’s where the 10th Judicial District Pro Bono Program comes in.

Every Wednesday morning, a volunteer attorney arrives at the Fergus County courthouse to staff a pro bono legal advice clinic. There’s usually a line forming well before the official 8 a.m. start time - none have lawyers and almost all have no money. People seeking assistance with an array of legal issues find their way to the clinic through the Clerk of Court’s office, a referral by a private attorney, or simply by word of mouth. District Court Judge Jon Oldenburg knows the program well; once in private practice, he volunteered his services to the clinic long before taking the bench. He sends folks there too. With less than a handful of active attorneys in the neighboring counties, his colleague to the north, 14th Judicial District Court Judge Randal Spaulding refers litigants to the clinic as well. In half of the cases in the 10th and three-quarters in the 14th, at least one party is self-represented. Dockets are bloated and time is limited, but both judges carry a reputation of patience and compassion for otherwise self-represented litigants. Judges can certainly provide guidance, but not advice. The clinic provides at least a portion of the badly needed safety net.

You’d be hard pressed to find a program with a better pro bono participation rate – 100 percent. Every attorney in Lewistown is on the volunteer rotation. When Clerk of Court Phyllis Smith lets attorneys know it’s their turn, they readily step up – no excuses. Some people need only to ask a question or two and steered in the right direction. Others are in crisis, have no money and nowhere else to turn. To these folks, Wednesday morning brings hope at the end of a very long, desperate road.

Doug Day is a public defender in Lewistown. Heavy workloads and limited staff mean long days turning into long weeks without the commensurate financial benefit that often comes with private practice. But, Doug willingly takes his turn too. He doesn’t tout his contributions; he seems infinitely humble about it all. Instead, Doug focuses on the astonishing fact that it’s a voluntary all-in venture among the local bar. And I should mention Doug doesn’t grumble about giving the assistance or about the people he gives it to. I’ve never heard Doug pass judgment, lament about the poor choices people can make (after all, we all do), or curse the situations incomprehensible to the unaware. From near as I can tell, neither does the rest of the volunteer crew.

Access to justice is a big issue here in Montana. We’ve been on the cutting edge of initiatives for a long while now. We’ve created successful new programs, improved technology to deliver services and created committees and commissions to improve the work we do. But there in Lewistown, in a small room and no budget, a dozen committed lawyers put the ideal of justice for all into practice. All of us say to all of you: we notice what you do, we see the difference you make and we thank you for your invaluable contributions. Salute.

Court Help says “Good bye” to AmeriCorps Services Members...

The Court Help Program Self Help Law Centers could absolutely not keep going without the service commitment of our AmeriCorps service members! Although they will be missed, we are extremely proud of our AmeriCorps’ plans to continue a career in the law after spending this time in the public service.

Name: Kaileen Balzano

Hometown: Johnstown, NY

Term of Service: 2011-2013

Location: Yellowstone County Self Help Law Center

What are you up to next? Headed off to law school at SUNY Buffalo Law

What will you remember most about your service term? The people I have been able to have the pleasure of working with and getting to know.



Name: Isaac Ho

Home Town: Diamond Bar, CA

Term of Service: 2011 - 2013

Location: Helena, MT

What are you up to next? Law school

What will you remember most about your service? The beautiful Montana landscapes that I've been able to experience on my Friday drives (including the near-death experiences I've had with icy roads).

Name: Amy Green

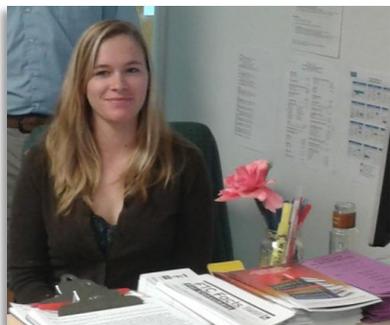
Home town: Butte, MT

Term of Service: 2012-2013

Location: Bozeman Self Help Center

What are you up to next? Saving money and applying to law schools

What will you remember most about your service term? I think the thing I will remember most about my time at the Self Help Center is how important patience and understanding are in finding solutions. Everyday brought new experiences and a wealth of knowledge that I will be forever thankful for.



Name: Kate Seaton

Home town: St. Louis, Missouri

Term of Service: September 2012-August 2013

Location: Great Falls

What are you up to next? Headed to Iowa City IA to start Law School

What will you remember most about your service term? Montana! The state is so beautiful and the people so nice. I was happy to be able to serve them!

We are actively recruiting for the 2013-2014 AmeriCorps Service Term and looking to place one AmeriCorps service member in Kalispell, Great Falls, Billings, Helena, and Bozeman starting September 9th, 2013. Our positions can be found by searching “Community Outreach” in “Montana.” On the AmeriCorps website: www.americorps.gov.

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