



The Court Help Reporter

Winter 2015

JUDICIAL BRANCH BRINGS COURT HELP PERMANENT FUNDING REQUEST TO THE CAPITOL

The Court Help Program has been funded on a one-time-only basis since its inception in 2008 and continuation of the program depends on the Court's current request for permanent funding under House Bill No. 2. HB2 contains the vast majority of appropriations to support the ongoing functions of state government, which includes the Judicial Branch—the Court Help's umbrella department. Read the full *Helena Independent Record* article about the funding request [here](#)

On January 15, Chief Justice McGrath delivered the State of the Judiciary Address to the Legislature. In his address, Justice McGrath specifically speaks to the Court Help Program as follows:

“ Most importantly, we must continue the Court Help Program statewide. ..Consider this—almost 2/3 of the domestic relations cases—mostly divorces and parenting plans—appear in court with at least one party not represented by a lawyer. Family cases are more than 20% of the case load in District Court. To put this into real numbers, about 6,500 family law cases each year come to court with no attorney. So other cases must wait while the judge and court staff work with a party that does not understand court procedure; does not know the correct forms or papers that must be filed; does not know the appropriate questions to ask a witness or what information the judge needs to decide that case. With a staggering number of cases each year, we must recognize this situation as one reason, if not the biggest cause, for delay in our system.

Court help is designed to assist individual Montana citizens with court service areas, places where you can get proper forms and assistance with the court process without unnecessary expense. The Judicial Branch's website receives 5,000 hits a month on the posted legal forms. Not all legal matters need attorneys. There are many ways we can simplify the process and provide people with helpful solutions. In a recent survey, an overwhelming majority of the users of the service indicated that they now understand their legal rights and were more prepared to handle their legal situation. Our Judges agree this program does significantly increase judicial efficiency and it does reduce court backlog. Incidentally, the Court Self Help staff does not offer legal advice.

Last biennium, the Self Help centers had over 26,000 contacts with individuals and small businesses, helping them navigate through the complexity of our court system. Statewide, we do this primarily with volunteers who are recruited and trained by the limited staff that we have. Because of our tiny budget, we leverage staff with volunteer labor, often AmeriCorps volunteers.

This program operates in urban and rural counties—throughout Montana.

The way our citizens approach the court system is changing dramatically; clearly our courts must adapt to these changing times.

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A YEAR OF COURT HELP ACROSS THE STATE

- ◆ In 2014 Self-Help Law Centers statewide provided self-help services **15,597** times
- ◆ About 45% of Self-Help Center visitors qualify for poverty-based public assistance
- ◆ About 80% of Self-Help Center visitors had a household income of less than \$30,000 a year before taxes
- ◆ Almost 3/4 of all those visiting the Self-Help Centers needed assistance with family law issues
- ◆ 355 of Self-Help Center visitors needed help with an Order of Protection
- ◆ 21% of Self-Help Center visitors are veterans and almost 300 were disabled veterans

“This resource is invaluable to people like myself that have low income and limited resources and would otherwise have no options for legal help.” A Self-Help Law Center Patron

MONTANA ATTORNEYS RISE TO THE LEGAL NEEDS OCCASION

In 2014, Montana attorneys provided almost **150,000 hours** in pro bono service to low-income Montanans—the value of these services approaching a startling **\$19 million**. By the sheer volume of lawyers and the pro bono hours they provide, it is evident the legal profession in Montana take the ethical obligation to provide pro bono services seriously. While we know the Rules of Professional Conduct indicate an attorney should provide pro bono services to individuals of limited means, we also know it isn't easy and it isn't free. In a lawyer's world, time is the most precious of commodities—time is money. Yet pro bono attorneys often take on the most difficult of cases, or return to take another case just as soon as the last one is completed. Some have two or more at a time. Because of pro bono services, a domestic violence survivor finds safety, a child enjoys stability, a homeless veteran is housed and struggling families find a way to make financial ends meet. These all have meaningful impact on our communities and the people who live in them.

“Each year, thousands of low-income Montanans gain meaningful access to our legal system because our attorneys fulfill the deal that such access should be available regardless of economic condition. We highly commend Montana's attorneys for advancing the goal of access to justice through volunteer service.”

Chief Justice Mike McGrath

COURT HELP ADDS THREE JUSTICE FOR MONTANANS AMERICORPS MEMBERS TO ITS RANKS



Zachariah Tkachyk

Home Town: Whitefish, MT
Location: Flathead County Self-Help Center

Zach attended the University of Montana and is a graduate of University of Northern Colorado. Zach is pursuing law school on the West Coast and is active a number of social efforts in the Flathead community.



Harmony Wolfe

Home Town: Great Falls, MT
Location: Cascade County Self Help Center

Harmony attended Hollins University in Roanoke, VA earning her BA in Art History and received her Masters of Art in Art History at the University of California, Riverside. Prior to joining the AmeriCorps, Harmony worked as a co-curator and preparatory at the BOIS Gallery in Riverside, CA. Harmony is also an alumnae of AmeriCorps, doing a tour in the MLSA in Helena, MT.



Harley Brown

Home Town: Lacey, WA
Location: Cascade County Self-Help Law Center

Harley recently graduated from Western Washington University with a BA in Political Science and a Minor in History. During her college years, Harley was a Page for the Washington legislature, a student lobbyist, and interned at the Washington University Environmental Center.



Justice for Montanans

Fighting Poverty, Achieving Justice, Improving Lives

Established by the Montana Legal Services Association, in partnership with the Court Help Program of the Montana Supreme Court Office of the Court Administrator, the State Bar of Montana's Modest Means Program, and the Montana Office of Consumer Protection & Victim Services, the project places 18 members throughout Montana to help provide and expand intake, legal information and referral services for Montana's low-income residents seeking legal assistance.

CENTERS INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY EFFORTS

Yellowstone County Self-Help Law Center

The Billings Self-Help Law Center staff and volunteers stay plenty busy serving the thousands of people seeking self-help legal services, but they still find time to offer assistance in the Billings community.

Patt Leikam facilitated the Center’s assistance with the Billings Metro VISTA Project Food and Snack drive which provides food and other necessities to families experiencing homelessness. This included managing and securing donations.

The Center also participates in the Billings Community Connect Project, a nationally recognized best-practice program designed to fight poverty and homelessness. An annual Billings event since 2007, the program is designed to provide a safe place for people in challenging situations to gain access to services and resources and is a collaboration between city government the business community, non-profit services providers and volunteers. This year’s event was held at the Shrine Auditorium in Billings on February 3, 2015. If you’d like more information about the program, contact Patt at pleikam@mt.gov.



Flathead County Self-Help Law Center

The Flathead County Self-Help Center is formally partnering with the United Way and others in the Winter-Warm project. This collaborative community event is sponsored by the Project Homeless Connect Committee and is the largest gathering of veteran resources in northwest Montana. The Self-Help Center will offer support, legal information and resources to veterans seeking services at the event.

The Center has also partnered with the Flathead City-County Health Department and the Linderman Alternative School to provide information to young mothers and fathers about establishing a permanent parenting plan and child support.

Did You Know.....

- State’s courts handle 350,000 cases per year and process 1,000 cases a day.
- Almost 2/3 of domestic relations cases appear in court with at least one party not represented by a lawyer—6,500 cases with no lawyer.
- The Judicial Branch legal forms website receives 5,000 hits a month.
- There are more than 3,500 Orders of Protection filed in Courts of Limited Jurisdiction alone each year.