



# Court Help Program Update

*Spring 2013*

The following summarizes the operations of the Court Help Program of the Montana Supreme Court. Court Help Program Self Help Law Centers assist Montanans in acquiring legal information and resources to meet their legal needs. In addition to facilitating self help law services, the Court Help Program hosts a Pro Bono Coordinator who works with statewide and local pro bono resources to promote attorney involvement in addressing court efficiency challenges.

Court Help Program Self Help Law Centers have served Montanans on over 2,000 occasions January through April 2013.

## **Court Help Budget...**

Governor Steve Bullock signed the main state government funding bill in early May, which authorizes close to \$650,000 for the Court Help program. The funding will allow the program to continue for the next two years. The funding authorized by the 2013 Legislature is about \$40,000 less than requested and still on a one-time-only basis.

The program was originally funded on a one-time-only basis by the 2007 Legislature. It has been reauthorized each session since 2007. The funding will pay for on-going operations of the self-help centers, the AmeriCorps programs, form development and pro bono support. Members of the Judicial Branch's legislative subcommittee expressed an interest in leaving the one-time-only funding in place in order to re-examine the program again in 2015. Committee members were specifically interested in rural outreach, income levels for program clients, and program outcomes. Court Help staff look forward to the opportunity to provide this information again in 2015.

## **New Locations!**

In December 2012, the Yellowstone County Self Help Law Center relocated to the Center for Children and Families, located at 3021 3rd Ave North, Billings, Montana. The Center is excited to share space with long-time community partners. Customers may use the North 31st Street Entrance. Thank you to the Parmly Library for hosting our Center for many years.



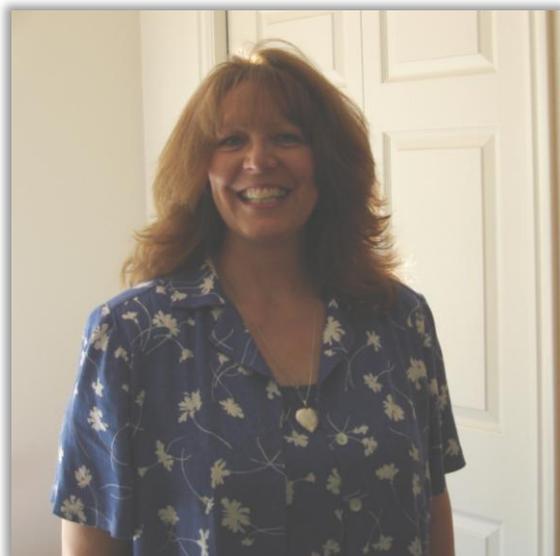
In February 2013, the Cascade County Self Help Law Center moved across the street from the Cascade County Courthouse. Although we appreciated the convenience of being physically part of the courthouse community, our new location will facilitate maximum collaboration with the Cascade County Law Clinic and Victim Witness also located in the basement of the law office of Nathan Hoines and Michael Tramelli at 401 3rd Ave North. Thank you to Mr. Hoines and Mr. Tramelli for accommodating us and to the Judges of Cascade County for supporting and assisting us in finding our new space.

## Court Help Services in Custer County...

As part of the Court Help Program's purpose of providing self help legal resources, tools, and information on a statewide basis and emphasizing cost effective technology, the Court Help Program has initiated a pilot project providing self help consultation services via vision net to Custer County. The pilot project consists of self help staff hosting weekly two hour self help sessions for interested litigants. Sessions began in April 8 and will take place every Monday from 12:00pm-2:00pm. We hope utilizing vision net technology along with our Custer County Court Help Kiosk will provide a more comprehensive service to Custer County residents.

## New Self Help Center Staff

In January, the Missoula Family Law Self-Help Center welcomed Sheri Taylor as its new coordinator. Sheri was heavily involved in the Self-Help Law Program (formerly known as the Family Law Advice Clinic) at Montana Legal Services Association. In large part, Sheri's work at the Missoula Family Law Self-Help Center will be much the same as in her prior position where she helped pro se litigants draft family law documents and coordinated volunteer attorneys to provide legal advice to those individuals. At the time the MLSA program was cut in 2011, Sheri was assisting 284 pro se litigants across the state. Sheri is passionate about helping people in difficult situations and brings to the position her education in paralegal studies and non-profit management, in particular, as well as her experience recruiting, training, and managing over 100 disaster service volunteers at the American Red Cross. Welcome, Sheri!

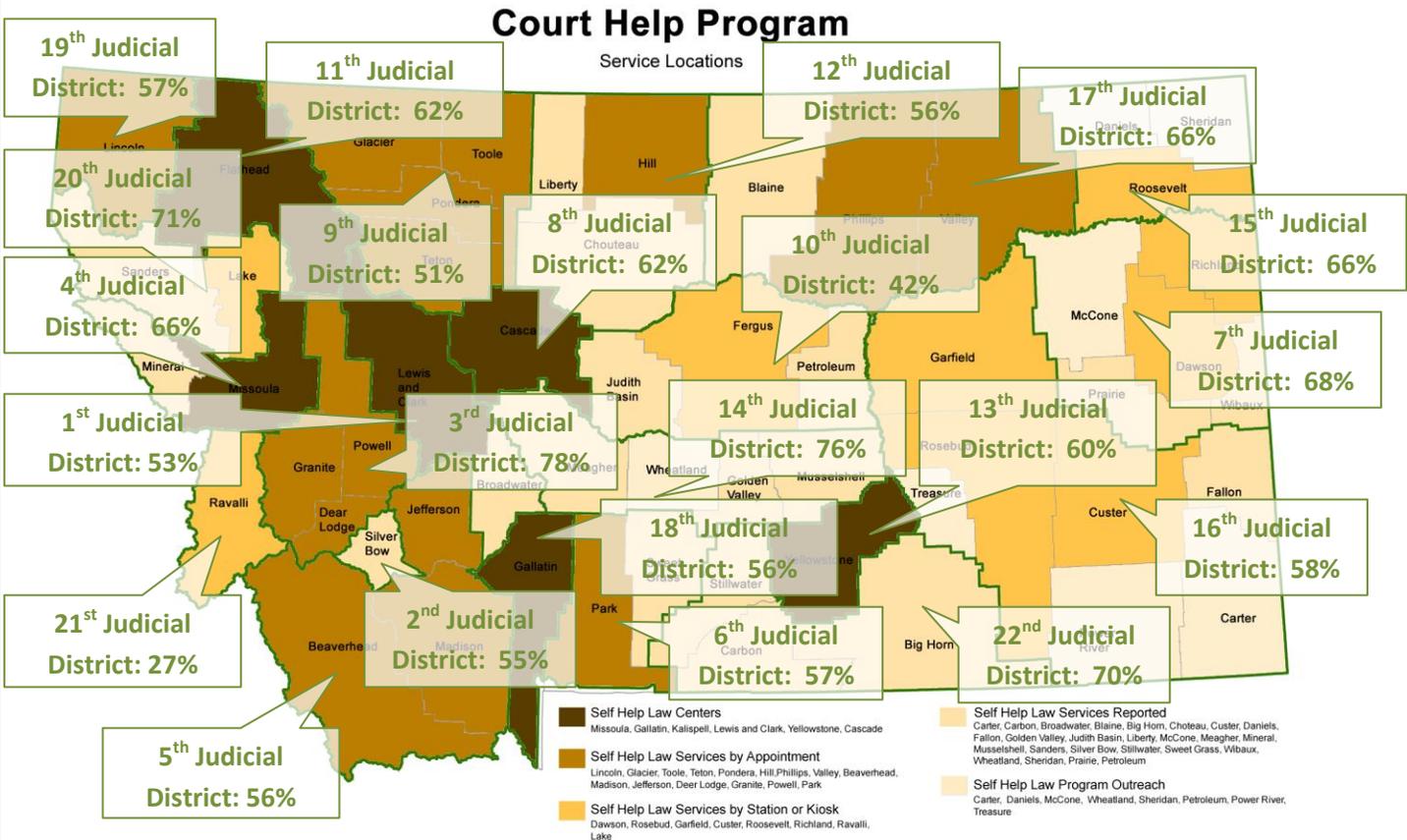


In April, Linda Frank, of Kalispell, also joined our program as Facilitator of the Flathead County Self Help Law Center. Linda has a stellar reputation among the legal community in Flathead County having served over 25 years as a paralegal for Sherlock & Nardi, a general practice firm that closed its doors last year. We are excited to integrate Linda's background and perspective in self help program operations.

Welcome, Linda!

## Many Self Represented Litigants Appear in Domestic Relation Cases...

In preparation for this legislative session the Court Administrator's Office queried the Full Court database to reveal the percentage of litigants self representing in domestic relations cases. The following map illustrates what percent of DR cases have one or both parties representing themselves. The color variation indicates the type of self help services provided by county.



**SJ0022 is a joint resolution requesting an interim study evaluating current court procedures in family law cases** and considering alternative solutions to addressing the significant burden family law cases place on the court system. SJ0022 notes **“Montana district courts experienced a record number of filings in 2012, exceeding 50,000 in new case filings statewide for the first time in history ...** approximately 60% of which, more than 6,500 cases in 2012, have at least one party who is not represented.” Since approximately 80 % of self help customers are seeking family law legal information and forms, the Court Help Program would benefit significantly from a comprehensive study regarding self represented litigants in district court. SJ0022 was assigned to the Law and Justice Interim Committee.

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