

Court-Annexed Self-Service Center: Maricopa County Arizona Model

A new approach to serve self-represented litigants emerged in Maricopa County Superior Court in the early 1990's to address increasing numbers of litigants without lawyers in consumer-related civil matters – essentially minor civil cases and family court cases (dissolution, child support, child visitation, etc.). Between 70 – 80 percent of divorcing couples either had no lawyer representation or a lawyer advocate on only one side of the case, generally acting on behalf of the plaintiff. At the heart of the reforms, court leaders developed new ways to access the court for non-lawyers; both into and through the court, namely the Internet and easy-read, color-coded, simplified packets of forms both in electronic and paper offerings. Lawyers were encouraged to practice in “unbundled” ways, providing discrete services and tasks for litigants who did not want full representation. State bar ethics counsel helped structure ways they could do so without violating the codes of professional responsibility. Information about mediators was promoted. And, as the court celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Self Service Center and over one million people served a few years ago, court officials announced new interactive Internet forms permitting customers to complete dissolution petitions or answers and submit them electronically to the court, together with the necessary filing fees. In the past few years, the court readjusted its calendaring system to allow for default divorces (where no respondent has answered the plaintiff's filing) on demand and their scheduling via the internet. As the self-service concept was developed, the court decided to help other courts address similar problems in growing numbers of self-represented litigants by presenting workshops for other jurisdictions across the country. The result... the Maricopa model was infused in whole or part in many other trial courts throughout the nation.