

SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF MARIN



LEGAL SELF HELP SERVICES MOVE TO THE COURTHOUSE

Legal self help services, offered for the last six years at the Legal Self Help Center of Marin, moved to a new office in the courthouse at the end of June. These services, designed to provide legal assistance and procedural information to low income litigants and those who do not have attorneys, are now provided by the Marin County Superior Court. The Court's newest division, Legal Self Help Services, is located in Room 244 of the Marin County Civic Center Hall of Justice. The office hours are 8:30 to noon and 1:00 to 4:00, Monday through Friday. The phone number is (415) 492-1111.

In May, the Board of Directors of the Legal Self Help Center of Marin, a non-profit organization, determined that the Center would be unable to sustain its operations due to an anticipated significant budget shortfall and difficulties in raising additional operating funds in the current economic climate. The Board looked at a number of alternatives to closing the Center and determined that the best alternative was to dissolve the non-profit and transfer the services to the Court. The Court had contracted with the Center to provide small claims and family law services for many years and was well positioned to assume responsibility for these much-needed public services. Kristine Fowler-Cirby, President of the Board, said, "The Board's only priority was to assure continuation of these vital services for Marin's low income residents, non English speakers and those who have not retained legal counsel. Although we regret leaving our offices in the Marin Justice Center, we are confident that the Court will be able to carry out our mission with no interruption in services."

The Legal Self Help Center has been an anchor tenant in the Marin Justice Center since it opened in 2003. The Marin Justice Center, located across the street from the Civic Center, is owned by the Marin Community Foundation, which provides rental subsidies and operating grants to many of the non-profit legal services providers in the Justice Center. Although it made every effort to do so, the Marin Community Foundation has also felt the affects of economic decline on its investment portfolio and was unable to provide additional financial support to keep the Legal Self Help Center in the Justice Center. Dr. Thomas Peters, MCF Chief Executive Officer, stated, "We are enormously proud of the development of the specialized services of the Self Help Center, and are fully confident that with the Court's oversight and facilitation, the Center will continue its valuable help to those in need." Once it became clear that move to the Court was inevitable, Supervisor Steve Kinsey and Dr. Peters worked closely with the Center's Board of Directors to ensure a smooth transition to the Court. Supervisor Kinsey said, "Given the difficult choices we faced, I am especially appreciative that the courts have recognized the importance of maintaining access to legal resources."

Presiding Judge Verna Adams hailed the transition to the Court as an excellent strategic move to ensure that public access to justice remained strong in Marin. Judge Adams originally provided the judicial leadership to design and launch the Legal Self Help Center and served as its first Board President. She noted that the Court's commitment to services for self represented litigants has always been strong. "In these difficult budget times, the need for free, accessible legal information becomes more important than ever. Whether litigants face eviction proceedings, are victims of domestic violence, or are dealing with money judgments in small claims or family court, they come to us often in crisis. These issues can wreak havoc on the lives of Marin's most vulnerable residents. Legal setbacks for many of these people can be catastrophic, as they have no reserves to withstand financial and emotional challenges. The Court is

prepared to meet the needs of this population in a meaningful way with legal self help services.”

Legal Self Help Services will be co-located with the Court's Family Law Facilitator Program, which offers legal assistance to litigants who have child or family support issues or need help with custody and visitation arrangements. Alexandria Quam-Rios, the Family Law Facilitator, is an attorney who specializes in family law. She will also act as the manager of Legal Self Help Services, assisted by three other well trained court staff. In addition to one-on-one assistance from court staff, litigants may use a variety of web-based legal applications, available in English and Spanish, as well as step-by-step procedural packets available in the office. There are eight public workstations, configured with the most effective document preparation and legal research tools available for California court users. Three of the four staff are bilingual in Spanish and one is bilingual in Tagalog.

Although Legal Self Help Services have relocated to the courthouse, the Court, County and Marin Community Foundation are committed to ensuring the continuation of strong collaboration among the Justice Center partner agencies. Court Executive Officer Kim Turner affirmed the effectiveness of the current service delivery system. “We have spent six years building a seamless, ‘no-wrong-door’ approach to delivering timely, appropriate services to all who come to the Justice Center. We know that having a well-designed referral system and regular cross-training for all staff makes our network more welcoming to our customers. Especially in these lean times, we will redouble our efforts to ensure that those who need services find them accessible and easy to understand.”