

Self-Represented Litigants:

Analysis of Senior Internship served at the Pomona Superior Courthouse

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The Superior Courts have seen the number of self-represented litigants increase over the last few decades. Self-represented litigants are those who choose to go through the court process without an attorney. The growing number of self-represented litigants causes a great challenge for the courts, especially in family law. This paper will explain the effectiveness of the Los Angeles Superior Courts Self-Help Centers. The literature review will analyze the problems and solutions for meeting the needs of self-represented litigants. The analysis will come from my intern experience at the Pomona-Self Help Center. The effectiveness of Self-Help Centers will be evaluated through scholarly work and my internship.

I interned at the Self-Help Center located in the Pomona Superior Courthouse. The purpose of the center is to offer assistance and information for self-represented litigants. While the center does not represent the litigants in court, the center provides the tools so that litigants can know their rights. An attorney reviews the paperwork before the litigant files it, to ensure there are no mistakes. Located inside the courthouse, the center allows litigants to easily gain information about the court process before the hearing, access other programs that are offered by the court, and file with the clerk's office on the same visit. Without the center's easy availability, it would be difficult for these litigants to gain the knowledge needed to go through the court process without an attorney. To evaluate if the center meets the challenges of the litigants, the research question for this paper is: Are Self-Help Cen-

ters effective at meeting the needs of self-represented litigants?

This internship was selected to gain firsthand experience in the justice system. I was interested in how someone who does not have an attorney is able to navigate the court process and receive a fair outcome. I was able to learn how to provide one-on-one assistance to litigants who came to the center. This internship allowed me to assist the community, while also seeing how the courts address the needs of self-represented litigants. Through my time at the Pomona Self-Help Center, I was given the opportunity to think critically about how effective the center is in helping these litigants and if any improvements could be made.

The literature review will explain multiple factors that scholars have found which lead to the effectiveness of Self-Help Centers. The factors that will be discussed are neutrality and impartiality, the com-

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plexity of the process, language barriers, online limitations, and complexity of the law. Scholars found that centers need to be neutral and impartial because they are available to all litigants and may assist both sides of a case. In terms of complexity of the process, because self-represented litigants feel overwhelmed with the process of opening a case, the center is able to minimize the stress by providing assistance and information about the court process. For language barriers, scholars have mixed views. Some believe the center has improved its ability to provide information in languages other than English. However, other scholars note how the center is not professionally trained to offer translation and may not correctly translate the court terminology. Online limitations will explain how scholars believe the information that is provided to litigants online is not the same quality as the information obtained from coming into the center. The last factor, the complexity of the law, will discuss how the center cannot assist all cases, and therefore, some litigants will need to hire an attorney or use another program offered by the court.

In the analysis, I use my experience as an example to draw connections to the scholars' work. In my experience, I have seen each of the factors: neutrality and impartiality, the complexity of the process, language barriers, and complexity of the law in practise. I will utilize the scholars' research and my time at the Pomona Self-Help Center to evaluate how effective the center is at addressing the needs of self-represented litigants.

Literature Review

Over the years, the number of self-represented litigants has grown significantly in family courts, which leads to several challenges. Self-represented litigants choose not to hire an attorney if they cannot afford one. Some believe the case is simple enough to handle on their own (Barclay, 1996). It has been found that many of these "litigants require additional time at the clerk's office and in the courtroom because they do not understand the procedures or limitations of the court" (Hough, 2004, pg. 306). So, the court gets packed with these litigants because they need more attention to understand what is going on with their case. Also, these litigants tend to lose more frequently and even if able to win some aspect of their litigation, self-represented litigants are likely to forfeit important legal rights during the process (Hilbert, 2009). Another challenge is that many of these litigants speak a language other than English. Since so many litigants are forced to go to court alone because of economic hardship, the justice system needs

to implement services to help or else people will lose confidence in the courts (Podgers, 1994). There is no evidence that these numbers will decrease, so programs need to be created to assist self-represented litigants. One service that has been established to help self-represented litigants are Self-Help Centers. The factors of running a Self-Help Center will be evaluated to see how effective the center is at meeting the needs of self-represented litigants.

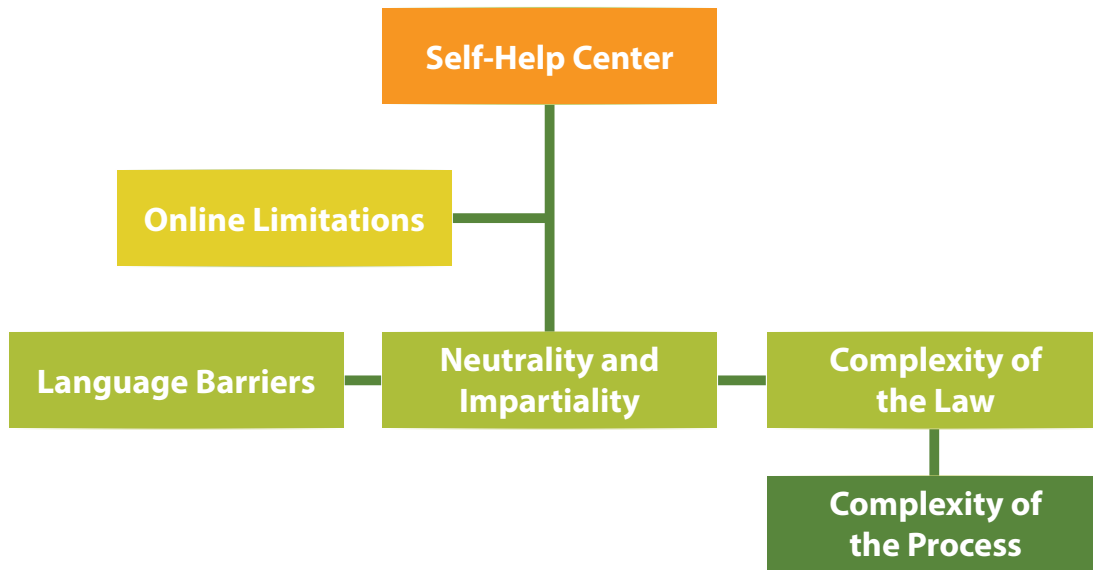
Neutrality and Impartiality

Self-Help Centers provide assistance at no charge and are open to all members of the community regardless of income or immigration status. "Self-Help Centers provide neutral, non-confidential information to all court users and must always be available to sides in any court action" and does not create attorney-client relationships (Zorza, 2009, pg. 522). Thus, the center will not represent the litigant at court but will provide information to the litigant to be able to achieve success at court. By being a neutral location, it will only provide assistance and not advice. The reason that no advice is offered is to maintain the ability to be impartial in the event that both parties of a case come to the center for help.

A center is opened through a partnership between the courts and local legal services to provide services inside the courthouse, which began in the 1990s (Hough, 2004). The location of the center allows litigants to easily access the center and use the other resources located at the court during the same day. Through the opening of the centers, litigants who often encounter problems with forms and procedures can correct their mistakes (Podgers, 1994). Problems can be solved because the center was designed to provide assistance to self-represented litigants who did not have the knowledge to fill out the paperwork on their own. By having the paperwork correctly done the first time, the litigants will not delay their case to fix mistakes.

According to researcher Michelle Flaherty, it is important to understand the assistance that is available to self-represented litigants. She explains how "assistance is not about helping one or the other party succeed; rather, it is about ensuring that all parties have a fair opportunity to present their case" (Flaherty, 2015, pg. 127). Therefore, the center is not there to help one side of a case win, but rather provide both sides with the tools to have the ability to ask for the orders he or she wishes by displaying the explanations of why those desired orders are needed. Another term Flaherty explains is impartiality. It "has been characterized as a legal boundary,"

Table 1: Key Concepts



that should not be crossed. (Flaherty, 2015, pg. 135). If the legal boundary is crossed, then not only will the outcome be illegitimate, but also the center will lose credibility. Therefore, it is important that the center is impartial in order to allow a fair outcome to be reached, while also ensuring both sides that no party was given extra assistance while at the center.

Complexity of the Process

There are multiple benefits to self-help centers. One is the service provided is cost-efficient and requires low maintenance, which is why self-help centers are likely to be the first option for courts to address the increasing numbers of self-represented litigants (Hilbert, 2009). This is typically the first place, even before filing, litigants go to in order to gain critical guidance through the entirety of the case. By knowing the court process, self-represented litigants will not overwhelm the courtroom with hearings. The assistance provided allows cases to be resolved at the first court appearance, thus there is no need for future court hearings (Greacen, 2011). Therefore, by not having to return to court, not only will the court save time, but also the litigants themselves save time because they do not have to take time off work to come to court multiple times. By going to the center, the self-represented can eliminate the confusion of court.

Judgments are the final step of the court process to finalize the orders and have an enforceable court order. This step tends to be the most challenging for self-represented litigants to handle without any assistance. Scholar John Greacen conducted a case study in the trial courts located in California’s San Joaquin Valley to evaluate the usefulness of self-help centers. Before the centers were established, judgements were incorrect, missing information, or lacked a proper proof of service resulting in all of them being rejected. (Greacen, 2011). In the case study, it was found that in post self-help centers all those errors were fixed and no judgments were rejected (Greacen, 2011). The centers provided the assistance needed to eliminate the struggle of judgments. Also, the time spent at a court hearing was drastically reduced because the litigants were aware of their rights and the process of the court. The case study found that Self-Help Centers save an average of “at least one hearing per case, 5 to 15 minutes for every court hearing, and an hour of court staff time related to providing assistance to self-represented litigants and reviewing proposed judgments” (Greacen, 2011, pg. 20). Therefore, rather than taking up the time of the court, litigants who do not know the process of court or what was expected of them in a courtroom, could be directed to the center to gain this necessary knowledge.

Language Barriers

California is a linguistically diverse state and there is an obstacle for litigants whose first language is not English to understand what is being asked in the courtroom. “Despite extensive efforts by the courts to recruit and train interpreters, the number of fully qualified court interpreters has actually declined over the past decade, with the largest single decrease in Spanish-language interpreters” (Robinson, 2008, pg. 1). This means litigants must wait for an interpreter to be done translating another case in order to have an interpreter in court with them. Another option the litigant has is going to court without an interpreter, which runs the risk of not understanding what is being asked in court. If there is no interpreter present, some litigants choose to have a third party serve as an interpreter, such as a family member or friend, to translate during the trial. However, this does not solve the problem as “study after study has shown that bilingual speakers who have no training in court interpretation cannot function adequately in a court setting” (Robinson, 2008, pg. 2). Thus, litigants who try to solve the problem on their own will not help themselves since the third party may not properly translate the judge’s questions. Litigants who have limited English proficiency should have an interpreter, but there is a high demand and not enough supply of interpreters to fulfill the litigants need, leaving them with few options.

Self-Help Centers cannot offer interpreters, but try to help litigants who do not speak proficient English to understand the court process. Court material have been translated into different languages to reflect the needs of the community (Greacen, 2011). The translated court material offers explanations of the process, how to get orders, and what to expect in the courtroom. There are efforts to address the needs of the litigants whose primary language is not English, however, what is currently being offered does not satisfy the need for interpreters. Self-Help Centers have not offered interpreters or aid during trial because the centers do not represent the litigants. Centers were created to offer assistance in filing the paperwork and providing information. Since there is no client relationship established, self-represented litigants still have to go to court without a staff member from the Self-Help Center. However, if a staff member were to go to court with a litigant, it would not guarantee that the staff member would offer the same quality of service as a trained interpreter. The only individual that should offer translation to self-represented litigants, who are not proficient in English, are professional interpreters.

Online Limitations

The Judicial Council has provided self-represented litigants with the ability to gather information about court procedures without having to leave their homes. An online version of the Self-Help Center was created by the Judicial Council to provide a flexible way to reach as many litigants as possible (Hilbert, 2009). An online Self-Help Center has been created in all counties of California. The purpose of the online Self-Help Centers was to allow litigants the option of having their questions answered through the website, rather than having to go to a courthouse where a center is located. It is free to the public and is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and can be accessed through the Internet. (Chase, 2003). Therefore, if at any time a litigant has a question regarding his or her court case, the answer can be quickly explained. The website was designed to make it easier for non-attorneys to read and understand. The website was created with self-represented litigants in mind, therefore it is written in plain English and not legal terms. This website provides over 1,000 pages of information on legal issues with step by step instructions for common proceedings. The standardized mandatory forms can now be filled out online, which allows the forms to be completed easily. Also, there are over 2,400 links to other resources that provide additional legal information (Hough, 2004). Thus, all the information that is available at the courthouse self-help centers is also available on the Internet. A few years after the website was established, a Spanish translation was made available.

While offering online Self-Help Centers can be useful for some litigants, not all the needs of litigants can be met through the website. It is beneficial to have the ability to access this resource at any time. h

However, it does not provide the most useful service for self-represented litigants. What most self-represented litigants need is someone who understands the court process to explain how paperwork is filed and what to expect during the trial. As researcher Deborah Chase explains, the “personal contact between self-help staff and litigants is crucial” to verify the information is understood (2003, pg. 415). That is why if possible, litigants should go to the self-help centers located in the courthouse to have a more in-depth understanding of the court process, that cannot be offered through a computer.

Complexity of the Law

Although self-help centers provide a wide array of information and assistance, not all questions can

be answered at this location. To help self-represented litigants get the information and services they need, self-help centers operate as a major referral source for other sources. Thus, even if the center cannot provide assistance, a litigant's time would not be wasted at the center because the center can provide a referral to someone who could provide the needed assistance. Therefore, the center not only provides assistance, but also will be able to direct litigants to the resource that will offer the best assistance for his or her case.

Despite the centers' best efforts, some litigants' cases need an attorney. To help those litigants, self-help centers will refer to pro bono, legal aid, or private attorneys who provide low-cost or limited representation (Hilbert, 2009). Some attorneys who are on the referral list offer a free consultation to explain to the litigant what help the attorney can provide in gaining the orders that the litigant wishes. Another option for litigants is hiring an attorney for the most challenging aspect of the case. In addition, some attorneys will work pro bono, meaning for free, depending on the financial circumstances of the litigant.

Besides hiring an attorney, other programs offered by the court can assist a litigant when a Self-Help Center is not able to handle the case. For example the family law facilitators, which is located inside the courthouse. The purpose of the family law facilitator is to offer assistance for those self-represented litigants who have questions regarding child support, maintenance of health insurance, and spousal support (Hough, 2004). This service works similarly to the Self-Help Center in that only assistance is provided and no attorney-client relationship is established (Hough, 2004). Litigants will be familiar with the structure and know the extent to which family law facilitators will offer assistance. The family law facilitator will provide all the information regarding monetary issues, which is not an area that Self-Help Centers assist with.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by self-represented litigants going through the court process alone need to be solved. One solution is Self-Help Centers. The tools that are available online do not provide the same level of assistance that one would receive at the courthouse location. Through Self-Help Centers, self-represented litigants have the ability to better understand the court process, while also receiving one-on-one assistance to verify the forms are filled out correctly. Information that is provided by the center is neutral and impartial to ensure the center is not giving advice. The one-on-one assistance reduces the complexity of the

process. If the litigant needs help that is beyond the scope of the Self-Help Center, then the litigant's next option is being referred to an attorney, which highlights the complexity of the law and how the Self-Help Center is not able to provide assistance in all cases. Self-Help Centers offer limited solutions to language barriers as during the most critical stage of the court process of the case, the trial, there is no help offered as the litigants will be alone. Also, not many volunteers at the center are bilingual, and those who are bilingual have not been trained to translate through the court. There are resources available for the self-represented to have their court process run as smoothly as possible, but not all challenges have been solved.

Experience

The Judicial Council allocates \$1.25 million of the budget to all courts to establish or enhance self-help assistance throughout California. Of the \$1.25 million, Los Angeles County receives \$290,548 (Judicial Council of California, 2007). The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors then funds and develops Self-Help Centers throughout the county. Each location is operated by Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) staff comprised of a trained lawyer, knowledgeable professionals, and volunteers. The purpose of Self-Help Centers is to provide information and resources to litigants so they can effectively represent themselves in court. Assistance is provided for various cases including family law, divorce, paternity, guardianship, child custody, unlawful detainer, name change, civil restraining order, and civil complaints. Self-Help Centers fulfill a critical need in Los Angeles County by providing information and resources to people that are representing themselves in court without the help of an attorney. I completed my internship at the Self-Help Center located inside the Pomona Courthouse.

The volunteers play an essential role in the Self-Help Center. The number of volunteers that are present at the center will determine how many litigants can be assisted that day. It is the volunteers who are providing one-on-one assistance to the self-represented litigants. Thus, there is a demand for volunteers to be at the center or else only a small number of litigants can be assisted. Since the volunteers are expected to answer the questions of the litigants, it is important that they are knowledgeable about the court process and paperwork. Therefore, the training the volunteers receive at the beginning of their time at the Self-Help Center is key in being able to properly assist litigants. A new volunteer will shadow a more experienced volunteer for a few weeks in order to understand how litigants receive assis-

tance from the center. During the training period, the new volunteer will learn about the forms, how to complete the forms, and the court process. Then a short reverse shadow period will occur to ensure the new volunteer is able to handle a case on his or her own. During this phase of training, the roles will be reversed as the new volunteer will assist a litigant while the more experienced volunteer will sit during the one-on-one assistance to verify everything is done correctly. Once the volunteer has learned these skills, he or she can assist a litigant on his or her own. However, the volunteer is never alone because if the volunteer has any trouble while assisting a litigant, the paralegals or attorney are always around to clarify any confusion about what assistance the litigant needs. Without knowledgeable and committed volunteers, Self-Help Centers would not be able to assist a large quantity of self-represented litigants.

One volunteer duty is working the front desk to answer questions of litigants and assigning the assistance they will receive from the center. Some litigants just want information about their case, while the majority come to the center to receive assistance.

Since the center assists on a first-come, first-serve basis, the litigants that arrive early will be able to receive assistance that day. Therefore, if litigants would like to receive assistance, the center recommends arriving at 7 am. To receive assistance, the litigant will need to bring the necessary documents with them, which includes: the forms with the name and address written on each page, federal and state taxes from the past two years, if filing for a divorce, and a child support case number if there is an open case. If the litigant arrived early enough and with the necessary information, then that litigant will be set aside and called when a volunteer is available to provide one-on-one assistance. If the litigant arrived too late in the day or did not bring the documents needed, then the center will explain that it is important to arrive early and what needs to be brought the next time the litigant comes to the center.

Another volunteer duty is providing one-on-one assistance to correctly complete the case paperwork. Each volunteer gets assigned to sit down with a litigant to verify that all the information that is filled out on the paperwork is true and accurate. If any

Table 2: Litigation Budget

Case Type	Budget Required	Percent of Total
Family Law	\$20,584,368	47%
Domestic Violence	\$5,084,973	12%
Guardianship	\$4,190,005	10%
Conservatorship	\$2,482,678	6%
Simple Probate	\$1,030,124	2%
Civil (including landlord-tenant)	\$5,552,868	13%
Small Claims	\$4,026,797	9%
Other (including traffic, expungements etc)	\$1,051,562	2%
Total	\$44,003,364	100%
Combined Family and Domestic Violence		59%
Combined Probate		18%

question on the paperwork causes confusion to the litigant, the volunteer will try to explain the question in terms that the litigant will understand. Once all the paperwork is complete, a paralegal will verify the paperwork is completed correctly. If there are any errors, the paralegal will explain what needs correction and the volunteer will take the forms back to the litigant to make the corrections before having the attorney at the Self-Help Center review the paperwork. If there are no corrections, then the paperwork can go directly to attorney review. The attorney will review the cases in the order in which they are completed. Once the paperwork is reviewed, the attorney will either ask that the litigant make some corrections or if there are no errors on the form, then the attorney will state copies can be made. Two copies will be made and handed back to the litigant along with the original copy. The final step in assisting a litigant is giving instructions on how to file the paperwork and the next steps in the case. Before the paperwork is filed, it has been reviewed by two professionals, which allows the litigant to be confident that the paperwork has been completed correctly.

Analysis

The literature review outlined how scholars believe Self-Help Centers address some, but not all, the challenges self-represented litigants will face during the court process. Since not all challenges are solved through the Self-Help Center, then the center is effective only to a certain extent. Through my internship experience, I had the opportunity to be involved in a Self-Help Center and learn what is required to assist self-represented litigants. I have seen connections between my experience and the scholars' work, which will be explained in this section. This section will highlight how the Pomona Self-Help Center addresses the issues of neutrality and impartiality, the complexity of the process, language barriers, and complexity of the law.

Neutrality and Impartiality

Zorza argued Self-Help Centers provide neutral and non-confidential information to all court users that is available to both sides in a court case (2009). In many instances, one will open the case and a few weeks after, the respondent will come to the center to answer. When this happens, volunteers are to remain impartial and provide each with the same information. Also, when providing information, the volunteer cannot advise a litigant. If a litigant asks a question that begins with "should," the volunteer must be careful in

answering because "should" questions tend to lead to advice. If the question begins with "could," then that question is acceptable to answer because that is informing the litigant about the possible directions the case could go. Being able to recognize the difference between the two will take some practice, but it is an important concept to understand because this will ensure all parties have a fair opportunity. Without guaranteeing fairness, the center is at risk of going beyond its purpose and behaving like attorneys. Therefore, it is imperative that volunteers are trained properly and understand the significance of their work.

Another argument made by Hough is that a center located inside a courthouse allows litigants easy access to the services (2004). If the litigant needs to use another service located at the court, then it is easier for litigants to accomplish multiple tasks in one day. By having the center inside the courthouse, it allows litigants to file paperwork the same day. Also, after a court hearing, a litigant can come to the center to ask about the next step of his or her case. In some instances, some litigants are missing necessary documents to receive assistance from the center that day. To help with this potential problem, the center will look at the case summary and highlight what forms are missing. The litigant will take the highlighted case summary down to the clerk's office to ask for a copy of what is highlighted. Then the litigant can return to the center with those documents to receive assistance that day. If the Self-Help Center was not located inside the courthouse, then this would not be possible and the center would be less efficient.

Complexity of the Process

The scholarly argument by Hilbert states that Self-Help Centers provide services that are cost-efficient and require low-maintenance, that allows self-represented litigants to gain guidance about their case (2009). The front desk of the center will explain how a litigant can start their case and the steps that will follow once a case has been opened. After completing the paperwork, the litigant can return to the center for help with next steps or answer any questions that arise. The Self-Help Center can provide the litigant with the information necessary to handle the case on his or her own. This is an effective way to answer the questions typically asked at the clerk's office or during the trial, which makes the courthouse more productive.

In addition, Podgers explained how through the opening of the centers, litigants who often encounter problems with forms and procedures, can correct their mistakes (1994). The center is the location for litigants to complete error-free paperwork. Many

eyes review the paperwork before the litigant files it, which eliminates the chance of the paperwork containing errors. While this allows the litigant to feel confident that the paperwork is done completely; this is a slow process as the paralegals need to be free to check the paperwork. Also, with only one attorney at the Pomona Self-Help Center, only a small number of litigants can be helped in one day. Typically, the center will have 60 to 100 litigants arrive at the center in one day, some just to ask questions, but the majority are in need of assistance. However, it is not possible for all the litigants to receive one-on-one assistance, so many have to be turned away and told to come back earlier on another day. If there were two attorneys at the Self-Help Center, then it would be possible for more litigants to receive assistance, which would increase the effectiveness of the center.

Greacen, in his scholarly work, discussed how cases are resolved with fewer court appearances with the assistance of Self-Help Centers (2011). While a representative from the center will not appear in court with the litigant, the center tries its best to explain what is expected in court. Before filing paperwork, the volunteer will explain the court process and will answer any questions. However, since some time passes between the litigant's visit to the center and his or her court appearance, it is possible for the litigant to forget the information about how the trial will go. Also, for family law cases there are no pamphlets or information that the litigant can take home unless he or she wrote down what the volunteer explained on the day the paperwork was completed. For unlawful detainer cases, more information is provided as the center will play a video for the litigant to watch while his or her paperwork is in attorney review. It would be a good idea to have videos for cases of family law since that is the majority of cases the Pomona Self-Help Center assists with. This would allow litigants, who have family law cases, to get a visualization of how the trial will go. The center tries its best to give litigants the tools and knowledge to represent themselves in court, however, more could be done.

Another finding of Greacen, was that Self-Help Centers located in the San Joaquin Valley have eliminated errors made in judgments and no judgments have been rejected since the centers began offering this assistance (2011). Judgments can be completed once all matters have been discussed and agreed upon by both parties. When a litigant comes to the center to complete his or her judgment, all the documents filed in the case and the minutes of the trial must be brought in. This is so the volunteer who assists in the judgment will have all the necessary information. The volunteer will type all the judgment documents

and the litigant will verify that all the information is correct. The judgment is what the final orders will be, therefore, it is important that there are no errors. By completing the forms of judgment, the Self-Help Center drastically minimizes the chance of error, since an attorney will review the judgment before taking the paperwork to file. There are instances when litigants believe they can handle the judgment without any help and often times will be rejected. Then they must come to the center to fix those errors. Thus, if the litigant wants the judgment to be done correctly the first time, it is wise to receive help at a center.

While judgments are done at the Pomona Self-Help Center, not all the volunteers know how to complete judgments. Of all the volunteers, I am the only one who has been trained to complete judgments, so the majority of my time spent at the center is finishing the final step of the court process. If I am not at the center that day, then a paralegal is responsible for completing the judgment. It is unclear why I have been the only volunteer trained to do judgments. I believe all volunteers should be trained to know how to assist in judgments.

Language Barriers

According to Robinson, only those who have been trained to translate will offer quality translation and the number of professional interpreters in the courts has decreased (2008). The Pomona Self-Help Center has not been trained to translate, but if a volunteer does speak another language, he or she will use bilingual capabilities to try to translate for a litigant. However, this does not mean a correct translation will be offered. There have been instances when a volunteer may not know how to correctly translate, but will try his or her best to explain the process. For example, some volunteers, including myself, have had trouble explaining stocks, bonds, and sanctions. Therefore, it takes some time to attempt to translate one of these terms, but it may not be the correct translation. To fix this issue, it would be a good idea for volunteers who are bilingual to be trained on how to properly translate court terminology. That way, there would be no issue of incorrectly translating for litigants.

Greacen argued that court material has been translated into different languages to assist the litigants who do not speak fluent English (2011). The Pomona Self-Help Center provides how-to guides in both English and Spanish. These guides explain what each question is asking in the paperwork in case the litigant does not want to wait for one-on-one assistance with a volunteer. The paperwork itself is not translated into Spanish, but with a guide available it makes

it easier for Spanish-speaking litigants to know what the paperwork is asking. Even though these guides are offered, the majority of Spanish-speaking litigants would prefer to receive assistance from a Spanish-speaking volunteer. The challenge I have seen in the center is that there are not enough Spanish-speaking volunteers. On the days that I volunteer, I am one of two volunteers that speak Spanish. However, there are some days when no volunteer speaks Spanish, meaning the paralegals will have to assist the Spanish-speaking litigants. Since there is a short supply of staff who speak Spanish, often times the Spanish-speaking litigant will have to wait a little longer for someone who speaks Spanish to be free. Therefore, these litigants are at a disadvantage of being helped on the day they would like because of the few volunteers present at the center who speak Spanish.

Another issue is that the center does not provide translation for languages other than Spanish. During my time at the Pomona Self-Help Center, I have seen how it can be a challenge to provide assistance for litigants who speak Mandarin. There have been instances where an Asian litigant, who is not fluent in English, cannot get proper assistance because of the language barrier. There is only one volunteer who speaks Mandarin and he is not at the center every day. When no one in the center is able to communicate with the Asian litigant, the Pomona location would either try to call an interpreter to help translate between the staff member and the litigant or the litigant will be directed to another location, either the Self-Help Center in Pasadena or Downtown Los Angeles, to receive assistance. Also, there are no guides offered in Mandarin or any other language besides English and Spanish. Thus, the center has overlooked the needs of its litigants who speak other languages, besides the two most common languages. It would be a good idea to have the documents in our computers in multiple languages, in the case someone who is not able to speak Spanish or English comes into the center. This would allow them to receive some information. Therefore, the center needs to expand its information into multiple languages because the community does not just speak Spanish and English.

Complexity of the Law

According to Hilbert, there are some litigants whose needs go beyond the help of the Self-Help Center and need to be referred to another service (2009). The Pomona Self-Help Center does provide referrals, which are typically given at the front. The Family Law Facilitator is the where litigants should go if their case is only about financial issues, such as child or

spousal support. Some litigants make the mistake of thinking the center will help with monetary disputes, however, if that is the only issue of the case the center will not be able to help. Luckily, the Family Law Facilitator is also located in the Pomona Courthouse, so the litigant can still receive assistance that same day. Another referral the center provides is lawyer referral. The litigant will come to the front and explain his or her situation and then the center will provide the phone number and address of multiple lawyers who will be able to better assist. These lawyers will provide service for a low-cost or can be hired for only one aspect of the case. Therefore, there are instances when a litigant needs professional help, which is why the center tries to provide lawyers that provides services at a lower cost. Therefore, the center keeps up to date its referral list to guide the litigant to the best location to obtain the help he or she needs.

In addition, not all Self-Help Centers provide assistance for the same type of cases. There are cases the Pomona location does not provide assistance for, but another Self-Help Center does. An example would be the El Monte Self-Help Center, it provides assistance for worker's rights, while Pomona does not. Thus, Pomona will advise the litigant to go to the El Monte location to be able to receive assistance that meets the litigant's needs. Since there are multiple centers within Los Angeles County, it allows each location to specialize in assisting certain cases. This may seem like an inconvenience to the litigant because the court closest to his or her home does not meet his or her needs. However, it would be a challenge for each center to have the knowledge for all types of cases.

Conclusion

From the scholarly research and my intern experience, I can conclude that Self-Help Centers are effective at meeting the needs of self-represented litigants to a certain extent. Scholars have identified several variables which are needed to have an effective Self-Help Center. However, not all the areas have been fulfilled, meaning there are areas of improvement to increase the level of effectiveness. In all the factors, it was shown how the center tries its best to help satisfy all the needs of each self-represented litigants, but because of the complexity of the process and law, the center could only help so much. Also, language barriers are a serious obstacle that needs to be addressed, otherwise litigants whose primary language is not English will have a challenge with the court process, even with the assistance of currently available programs.

In my analysis, I evaluated the level of how effective each of these factors were in my case study and

saw the areas in which the Pomona Self-Help Center was lacking. Since the volunteers are the ones who provides the one-on-one assistance, it is important that enough volunteers work at the center to ensure people are being helped. The volunteers must learn not only the paperwork and the court process, but also how provide impartial assistance. Litigants who come to the center do not all speak English. Thus, the center should make an effort to find volunteers who are

bilingual and then train them to know how to translate court terminology to address the language barrier. Not all the litigants who arrive at the center can be helped that day. To correct this fault, the number of staff needs to be increased for the center to be able to handle more cases. Therefore, the Pomona Self-Help Center does provide assistance to the community, however, more litigants could be helped if improvements are made.

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Student volunteers can make a tremendous difference in the lives of the self-represented litigants they serve. Shown here: the Los Angeles East District Superior Court and County Building in Pomona, California.





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