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Self-Help Legal Centers Improving Access to Justice, State Report Finds

San Francisco—Self-help centers in state trial courts are helping thousands of Californians who need legal assistance and cannot afford an attorney, according to a report accepted by the Judicial Council of California.

The most comprehensive report of its kind in the nation, “*Model Self-Help Pilot Program: A Report to the Legislature*” was submitted to the Judicial Council by a statewide panel named by Chief Justice Ronald M. George to study ways to assist the growing number of self-represented litigants in the state.

“The report is good news for the courts and all Californians,” said William C. Vickrey, Administrative Director of the Courts. “For the past decade, the number of people coming to courts without lawyers has grown dramatically, especially in family law cases. Self-help centers are meeting the critical need for legal information by removing economic barriers that prevent access to our courts. In addition, these programs are making our courts more efficient and are improving public trust and confidence in our justice system.”

The five self-help pilot centers evaluated in the report continue to operate in Butte/Glenn/Tehama Counties and in Fresno, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Contra Costa Counties. The report found that self-help centers:

- Offer a valuable method for providing services to persons who need access to legal information and for improving the quality of justice for litigants;
- Facilitate litigants’ ability to participate effectively in the legal process;
- Improve court efficiency;
- Help courts design systems to serve self-represented litigants more effectively;

- Promote public trust and confidence in the court system;
- Meet a great need for service in their communities; and
- Have the capacity to meet the needs of many non-English-speaking litigants.

The report was submitted to the Judicial Council by the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants, appointed by the Chief Justice in May 2001. The panel is chaired by Justice Kathleen E. O’Leary of the Court of Appeal, Fourth Appellate District, Division Three (Santa Ana).

Funded by the state Legislature, the pilot project is managed by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts, of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), which selected five model projects for implementation. Each project was evaluated over two-and-a-half years and received the same amount of funding: \$166,400, per year. The five projects are

1. ***Butte/Glenn/Tehama Counties:*** A regional project designed to explore how counties can work together to share self-help resources effectively and to provide legal information and education to self-represented litigants in rural areas.
2. ***Fresno County:*** A Spanish-language project exploring ways to provide services to a primarily Spanish-speaking population.
3. ***San Francisco County:*** A multilingual project testing methods to provide services to litigants who speak a variety of languages.
4. ***Los Angeles County:*** A project testing the most effective ways for a large urban court to coordinate the various independent existing self-help programs operated by the court and by legal services.
5. ***Contra Costa County:*** A technology project developed to assess the potential of Internet technologies to assist persons outside the courthouse and to experiment with the use of videoconferencing services in multiple locations.

The complete report is available on the California Courts Web site at <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/equalaccess/modelsh.htm> .