Making the Most of Internship Opportunities

For the court and students' benefit

When working with the university staff to recruit students...

- Start with your local campus' Community Partnerships or Service Learning office.
- Be clear about the specific **community problem you are addressing** in your self-help centers or other court programs utilizing student assistance.
- Be clear about what court-based self help centers are and do.
- Prepare a tool that court staff or a professor can use in class to explain the opportunity.
- Consider recruiting and placing **students as a cohort**. This helps them feel a part of a team working together on a common goal. They will get to know each other and support each other during their service.
- Be clear about the **benefits for the student**. Self-Help centers are uniquely positioned to offer students the following important benefits: real, direct interaction with the public; lessons in legal procedure; invaluable experiences listening and communicating with people; exposure to many different languages and cultures; and opportunities to work with court staff, attorneys and judges.

When working with the students...

- Be formalized and organized about your **training program.** If you recruit students as a cohort, provide them an orientation and training together and then arrange 1 or 2 other group training sessions through out the semester or year.
- Include codes of professional conduct and discipline protocols in a contract with the students.
- Establish **uniforms and/or dress codes** and include it in the intern contract. This helps identify the interns, which is helpful to both the public looking for assistance, as well as court staff and judges.
- Clearly define their placement, duties and schedule. Get them to commit to a full semester or year and adhere as best as possible to a set schedule, with a plan for exam weeks included.
- Allow students a shift or two to "shadow" an attorney or experienced intern before they begin directly assisting the public. This will make the student and the court staff more comfortable.
- Establish a menu of "special student development opportunities" including judge shadow days, courtroom observations, career day events, and enrichment trainings.
- Provide high achieving students with **opportunities to represent the court** at special community-based events like a veterans/homeless resource fair, adoption day or a diversity summit, press interviews and filming, etc.
- **Measure student performance** by counting tasks and assessing their accuracy. The JusticeCorps program counts the number of referrals students make for litigants to associated services as well as the number of packets of paperwork they help litigants complete. At the end of a shift the students work is verified and assessed by a supervisor.
- **Mentor the students**. Let them know they are supported and valued. Be open to questions. They will want to come back. Even when it's stressful, if they know that they are appreciated and supported, they will continue to serve, build their skill set and become more efficient and productive.

For additional information, advice and resources, contact Martha Wright, AOC Senior Court Services Analyst and Statewide JusticeCorps Coordinator. Martha.wright@jud.ca.gov, 415-865-7649

Material taken from lessons learned from implementation of the California JusticeCorps program, an AmeriCorps funded initiative.

University Contacts

Where to begin?

- List of Community Partnership Coordinators in the California State University System

http://www.calstate.edu/csl/about_us/contact/community_partnerships_coordinators.shtml

- List of University of California Campuses (some UC campuses service learning or community partnership offices)

http://universityofcalifornia.edu/campuses/welcome.html

- List of California universities (public and private) that are part of the national Campus Compact organization, a statewide collaboration to promote service as a critical component of higher education

http://www.cacampuscompact.org/about_our_members/member_list.html

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Sample Statement of Need

How student service in court based self-help centers addresses an important community need

California is experiencing an explosion in numbers of individuals appearing before the court without professional legal representation on a variety of matters from family law to housing issues. According to the Judicial Council of California's Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants (February 2004), California courts report 80% self-representation rates in family law and housing related cases. In all, the Statewide Action Plan asserts that over 4.3 million California court users each year are self-represented. The majority of these individuals do not obtain legal representation because they cannot afford it.

Resources available to meet the needs of these self-represented individuals are sorely lacking. In fact, as stated by California Assembly Member and Judiciary Committee Chairman Dave Jones in a December 20, 2006 article in the San Francisco Chronicle addressing the issue, "California has one lawyer for every 240 people but only one legal aid attorney for every 8,737 low income people."

Because court procedures are designed for lawyers, the large number of people coming to court without professional representation creates problems on multiple levels. Self-represented litigants face many obstacles in their attempts to access the justice system including: 1) lack of understanding about how to initiate a legal action; 2) lack of familiarity with legal terms and mandatory forms; 3) misunderstandings about proper procedures, especially those regarding "serving" or giving notice to the other party; and 4) inability to follow or fully comprehend court proceedings including misunderstandings about orders given in court. Inability to resolve legal matters jeopardizes an individual's ability to secure safe, affordable housing, to overcome barriers to employment, to obtain guardianships, or to avoid domestic violence and elder abuse. It also has far reaching societal impacts including: family instability and resultant increases in numbers of children involved in the juvenile dependency and delinquency system; a general lack of public trust and confidence in the court system; increased challenges for law enforcement officers; and increased rates of homelessness…

…Los Angeles is home to over 9,900,000 people, nearly one third of the entire state. Barriers to accessing the court system such as low income and limited language skills are acutely present in Los Angeles. More than 22% of the population lives below the poverty level. 36% of residents are foreign born and over 54% of all households speak a language other than English at home. (U.S. Census Bureau: State and County Quick Facts.)

In fiscal year 2005-2006 alone, Los Angeles Superior Court saw more than 375,000 cases filed in common self-representation case types such as marriage dissolution, child custody and landlord tenant disputes (Judicial Branch Statistical Information System Report 2006). In that year more than 200,000 self-represented litigants came to the Los Angeles courts self-help legal access centers to try to resolve their legal matter.

Taken from the 2007-2008 JusticeCorps grant application for AmeriCorps funds.

Sample Statement

What are court-based self-help centers and why do they exist ?

The Superior Courts of Los Angeles, Alameda, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, in partnership with various local legal aid organizations and other justice system partners, have all implemented court-based self-help legal access centers and associated services to provide one-on-one or workshop setting assistance to self represented litigants by trained court staff and attorneys. Some of the centers focus primarily on family law issues such as divorce, paternity and child custody and visitation arrangements. Others handle a wide variety of legal matters that may also include employment issues, landlord/tenant disputes and small claims matters. The centers help litigants understand the legal procedure related to their matter, help identify the proper forms and help to fill them out and serve and or file them as required.

Evaluation reports conducted by California's multidisciplinary Task Force on Self Represented Litigants show that "court-based, staffed self-help centers, supervised by attorneys, are the optimum way for courts to facilitate the timely and cost-effective processing of cases involving self-represented litigants, to increase access to the courts and improve delivery of justice to the public." (Judicial Council of California's Statewide Action Plan for Serving Self-Represented Litigants, February 2004).

The primary beneficiary of these services are the litigants who have legal issues to resolve. The benefits to litigants include improved overall understanding of the court process; less time required away from work and/or family obligations to file paperwork or appear in court; referral to other related social services; and speedier resolution of the legal matter allowing the litigant to move past family conflicts or employment or housing crises to a place of greater stability in their lives.

There are also other, additional benefits to the courts and the greater community as a whole. The benefits to the courts include: a reduction in inaccurate or incomplete paperwork; diminished inappropriate filings; minimization of unproductive court appearances; and an overall increase in the court's ability to handle its entire caseload. Benefits to the greater community include: lessens the amount of time lost from work due to repeated court appearances; supports law enforcement with clear, written orders for child support enforcement, child visitation or restraining orders; lessens trauma for children at risk due to homelessness or family conflict or violence; and significantly contributes to the public's trust and confidence in the court and government as a whole.

Taken from the 2007-2008 JusticeCorps grant application for AmeriCorps funds.