

CHAPTER 3

EQUAL ACCESS FUND PARTNERSHIP GRANTS— PROJECTS, SERVICES, AND EVALUATION

1. Overview and Goals of Partnership Grant Program

One of the most innovative aspects of the Equal Access Fund has been the Partnership Grant Program, in which 10 percent of the funds are designated for nonprofit legal aid providers to operate self-help centers in collaboration with local courts. These partnerships were designed to help local courts respond to the growing numbers of self-represented litigants in courts throughout the state. Court data indicates that as many as 80 percent of family law litigants are unrepresented, and that as many as 90 percent of tenants in landlord-tenant cases do not have attorneys.²⁴ A major side benefit of the Partnership Grant Program has been the establishment of close working relationships between many of the projects and the courts that they serve, allowing both courts and legal aid providers to address systemic barriers to access to justice in a more efficient and effective manner.

The partnership grants have become a critical part of the growing framework of services for self-represented litigants offered by the California courts. Working with family law facilitators, family law information centers, small claims advisors, and other court-based self-help centers, legal aid providers bring their extensive experience providing self-help to low income communities..



²⁴ “Report of the Task Force on Self-Represented Litigants, ” approved by the Judicial Council February 27, 2004.

<http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/documents/selfreplitsrept.pdf>

While many legal aid providers have offered assistance at courthouses in the past, this is the first time that such efforts have been encouraged on a statewide basis and that grant conditions require identifying and planning ways to resolve potential areas of concern—such as maintaining the role of the court as a neutral entity. The solutions and new opportunities posed by these collaborations are providing models for other such self-help collaborations throughout the state and the nation. A description of each of the partnership projects is found in Appendix C, Partnership Grant Projects.

2. Description of Partnership Projects

“ . . . The greatest benefit of the program is timesavings! Time is saved at the clerk’s window and in the courtroom because the parties are better prepared and have accurate paperwork. They don’t have to have their papers processed over and over again, so we spend less time dealing with the same parties.”

—Court Administrator

A partnership project is a self-help center at the superior court, often sharing office space with the family law facilitator or other program. Partnership projects are always staffed by attorneys, with assistance from paralegals, law students, or clerks. Projects are usually open to the public between 10 and 30 hours per week. The public is served on a walk-in basis, and the core service consists of one-on-one contacts with self-represented litigants. The attorney or other staff person will usually screen each customer to ensure that the case or other issue falls within the purview of the project. If people do not meet these requirements, they are referred to another service. One-on-one assistance from partnership projects includes explaining the legal process, providing the necessary forms packets, and helping fill out forms. Many parties, particularly those with family law cases, return to the partnership project numerous times in the course of their case, as new papers are required or new issues arise. Most projects focus on a single case type, with family law cases being the most common. Partnership projects are generally able to provide assistance to persons with limited or no reading and writing proficiency and to persons with limited or no English language proficiency, particularly if those litigants speak Spanish. During the year-long period studied for the partnership grant projects, 16 partnership projects employing approximately 14 full-time equivalent attorneys and 10 additional full-time equivalent staff provided one-on-one services to over 20,000 people.²⁵

²⁵ Nineteen projects received partnership grants during the 2003–2004 fiscal year. Staffing data for three projects was not available.

Partnership projects provide a variety of services beyond one-on-one consultations. Workshops and clinics, offered by about one-quarter of the projects, give information on legal processes or assistance in filling out forms to a group of attendees. All projects develop and distribute written informational materials, provide education to organizations in the community, and do outreach to community groups to inform the community of the availability of the service.

3. Types of Persons Served²⁶

The majority of self-represented litigants served by partnership projects (92 percent) are between the ages of 18 and 59 (Chart 15). This reflects the concentration of partnership projects on family law case types. Projects concentrating on housing and income maintenance issues report a higher proportion of customers over the age of 59.

Chart 15
Age of Persons Served by Partnership Projects

Age Group	Percent
Under 18 years	1%
18 to 59 years	92%
60 and over	7%

Total number of customers with age reported by 12 projects = 17,800. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Chart 16 shows that persons identified as Hispanic or Latino are the largest group served, at 39 percent of all customers. Non-Hispanic White customers are the next largest group at 30 percent, with African Americans the third largest group at 15 percent. Asian/Pacific Islanders, however, make up 3 percent of customers while they represent 11 percent of all adults in poverty. This may reflect the need for expanded non-English-language services and the fact that there is a documented low usage of the courts among this broad ethnic category.

“People who have been to the program exhibit a much lower level of anxiety in the courtroom. It is very readily apparent from the bench. They are calmer and have a better understanding of what is happening to them. The program helps them interact effectively in the courtroom.”

—Court Commissioner

²⁶ Client descriptive figures are based on case resolution or “closing” data reported by projects. They reflect a count of individuals served by the project through some type of in-person or one-on-one contact. They do not include individuals served through large gatherings like community education sessions or reached through mass media or mass distribution of written materials such as brochures.

Chart 16

Ethnicity of Persons Served by Partnership Projects

Ethnicity	Percent
Hispanic or Latino	39%
White non-Hispanic	30%
African American	15%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3%
Native American	1%
Not reported	12%
Total	100%

Total number of customers reporting ethnicity data by 12 projects = 17,800. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

“Thank God for this clinic, I’ve been looking for help for three years.”

Almost two-thirds of partnership project customers are women. This is consistent with the representation of women in all Equal Access grant-funded projects (63 percent) (Chart 17).

Chart 17

Gender of Persons Served By Partnership Projects

Gender	Percent
Female	63%
Male	26%
Not reported	11%
Total	100%

Total number of customers reporting gender data by 12 projects = 19,100. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

4. Types of Legal Issues Addressed

The most common type of cases addressed by partnership projects were in the area of family law, with 12 of 19 projects addressing family law issues (Chart 18). The other major case types were housing, consumer/finance, and education/employment. Many projects address multiple case types but specialize in a particular type of case. For

example, while 5 projects handled consumer/finance cases, 664 of the 695 cases were handled by only one of those projects.²⁷

Within case types, partnership projects specialize in particular legal issues. In family law, the primary legal issues addressed were divorce (13 projects), domestic violence restraining orders (8 projects), child custody (7 projects), and child support (7 projects). In housing cases, projects specialized in unlawful detainer and evictions (10 projects). A few projects had a primary focus on small claims and civil harassment restraining orders (4 projects), and one project focused on guardianship issues.²⁸



Chart 18
Direct Case Assistance by Case Type

Type of Legal Need	Number of Projects	Number of Cases Closed
Family	12	13,300
Housing	8	1,885
Consumer/finance	5	695
Education/employment	5	129
Individual rights ²⁹	6	54
Health	3	47
Income maintenance ³⁰	3	24
Juvenile	2	3
Other ³¹	8	2,384

Total number of cases reported by 12 projects. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

²⁷ Based on "case closing" statistics reported by 12 of the 19 projects at the end of calendar year 2003.

²⁸ This information is based on project descriptions submitted by all 19 projects in their budget proposals for 2003.

²⁹ "Individual rights" refers to immigration, naturalization, mental health, prisoners' rights, the rights of people with disabilities, or other individual rights.

³⁰ "Income maintenance" refers to CalWORKs, TANF, food stamps, social security, SSI, unemployment compensation, veterans' benefits, workers' compensation, or other income maintenance.

³¹ "Other legal needs" refers to incorporation, corporate dissolution, Indian and tribal law, license (auto and others), torts, wills, estates, other.

“Your staff was very helpful and experienced. I received guidance and information that you can’t put a value on or that normal folks could even afford. Thank you very much, and all should be commended for a job well done and for their service to the community.”

5. Types of Assistance Provided

Most partnership projects provide direct, one-on-one assistance to customers (16). The primary forms of direct assistance are information about the legal process (12), providing forms and packets (11), and help in preparing forms (11). Most projects also refer customers to other services when appropriate. A few projects provide services primarily through workshops and other forms of community education and information dissemination (4).

Almost all projects provide services in languages other than English, through bilingual staff or access to interpreters. Almost 90 percent of projects provide services in Spanish (17), three provide services in Chinese, and one in Korean.

Most partnership projects were unable to be open to the public the same number of hours that their partnering courts were open. Projects reported hours of service ranging from a low of 6 hours to almost 40 hours per week, with most open 10 to 30 hours per week.

6. Nature of Assistance

Each partnership project was asked to provide counts or estimates of the number of self-represented litigants served in 2003 by service type.

Direct assistance. Approximately 22,000 self-represented litigants were served through direct assistance, based on 14 projects reporting. This assistance included providing information about the legal process, forms, and help in completing forms. This accounts for roughly two-thirds of the 34,000 people helped overall. Most of the remaining people were assisted through distribution of printed materials, with over 2,500 people being helped by workshops or clinics. The projects did not provide estimates for the numbers of people reached through Web-based materials or electronic kiosks.

Chart 19

Direct Assistance by Type of Assistance

Type of Assistance	Number of Persons Served
One-on-one assistance	21,400
Distribution of forms and packets	10,100
Workshops or clinics	2,500

Total number of customers reported by 14 projects. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Outreach and community legal education. Most partnership projects also provide assistance other than direct assistance to customers (Chart 20). The major form of this assistance is community legal education—the production and distribution of materials and presentations to assist self-represented litigants. These materials and presentations are designed to explain how the legal system works and to build a basic understanding of a particular community’s legal rights and responsibilities. In 2003 the partnership projects served large numbers of individuals in the community through writing and distributing brochures and newsletter articles and giving presentations to community groups. While partnership projects are beginning to distribute information through the Internet, this still plays a small role in legal education.

Chart 20

Community Legal Education

Type of Community Legal Education	Number of Persons Served
Brochures distributed	40,000
Newsletter articles distributed	11,000
Presentations attended	11,000

Total number of customers reported by 12 projects. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Referrals. Another type of assistance provided by partnership projects is referrals to other service providers (Chart 21). The most common form of referral is to a full-service legal aid provider. These referrals are made for people who have legal needs not addressed by the center or who, because of the complexity of their case or the

difficulties they might have in representing themselves, need a lawyer. A related but much less frequently made type of referral is to pro bono projects providing volunteer services by the private bar. Legal aid programs also work closely with volunteer lawyers, so a referral to a legal aid program could result in assistance from a volunteer lawyer. Referrals to lawyer referral services, pro bono programs, and other private bar referrals are made either because the self-represented litigant is ineligible for legal aid services due to income or other limitations, or the case appears to be one that will generate a fee. A large number of referrals are also made to a wide variety of social service agencies that assist people with nonlegal needs such as housing, health care, child care, or food.

Chart 21
Individuals Referred by Partnership Projects

Type of Referral	Number of Persons
Nonprofit legal aid provider	6,000
Social services agency	3,900
Private bar/lawyer referral services/pro bono	1,900
Other	1,000

Total number of customers reported by 19 projects. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

7. Funding and Staff

In 2003, \$950,000 of Equal Access Fund money was awarded to 19 partnership projects (Chart 22). Grants ranged from \$20,000 to \$74,000, with the average grant around \$50,000. As with the other Equal Access Fund grants, partnership grants are almost always combined with other sources of funding to create a viable court-based self-help center. Overall, Equal Access Fund money accounts for a little less than half the revenue needed for the centers to operate.

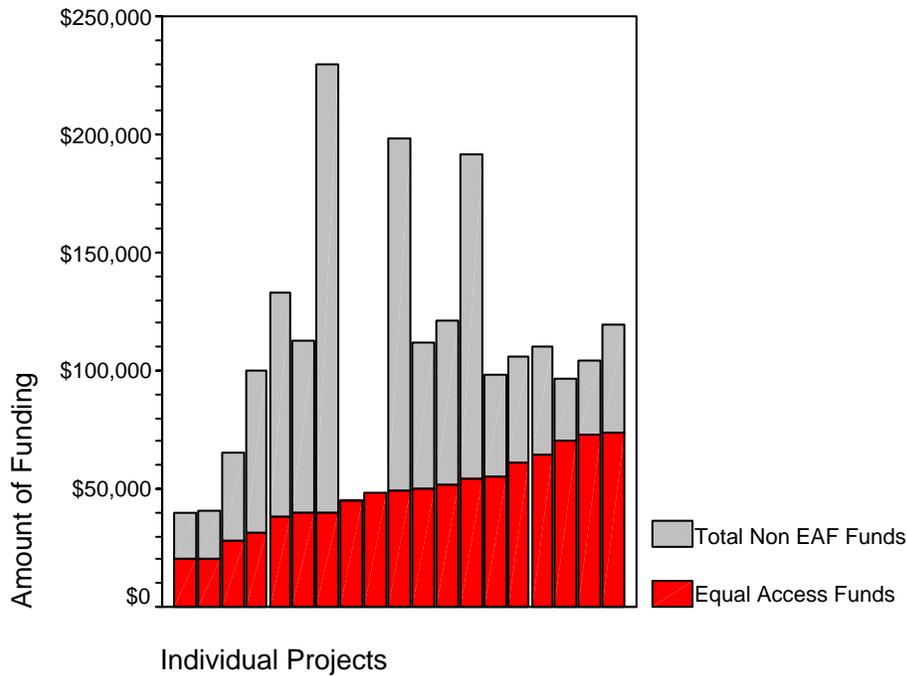
Chart 22
Project Funding for 2003

Source	Minimum	Maximum	Total for all Projects
Equal Access funds	\$20,000	\$74,000	\$950,000
Non-Equal Access funds	\$261	\$189,254	\$1,160,686

Total number of projects = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Chart 23 illustrates the diversity of funding combinations used by the various partnership projects to create their self-help centers. EAF funding has spawned a great deal of creative thinking and innovation that makes use of local opportunities and responds to local needs.

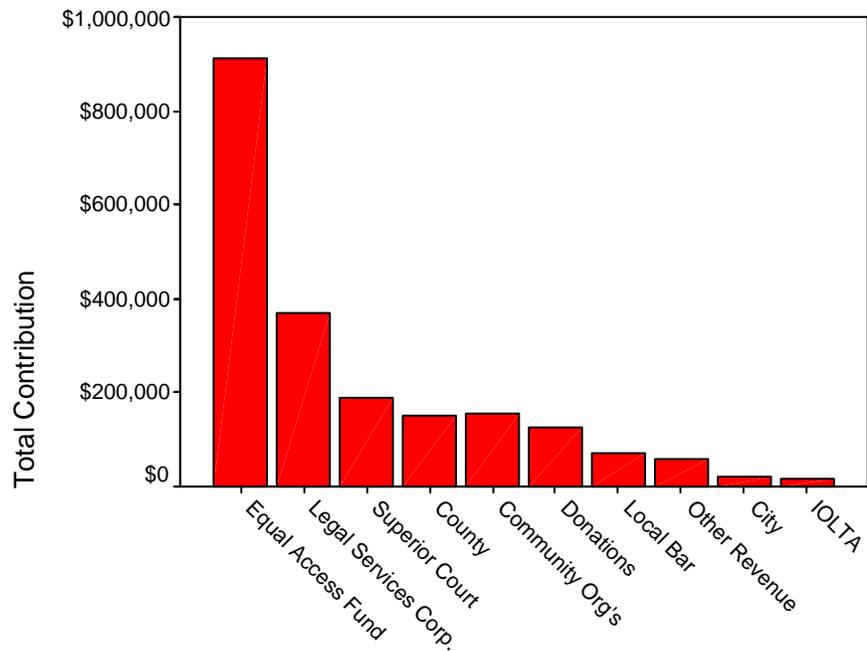
Chart 23
Total Project Funding by EAF and Non-EAF Funds



Total number of projects = 19. Total revenue = \$2,072,421

The partnership projects are both creative and determined in seeking additional funding and support. Notable among these sources are funds contributed by cities and counties. Funds have also been contributed by local bar associations, and projects have used some of their IOLTA funding to support the work of the centers (Chart 24).

Chart 24
Sources of Project Funding



Total number of projects = 19. Total revenue = \$2,072,421.

Similar to other Equal Access Fund projects, the partnership projects are staffed 51 percent with attorneys and 49 percent with nonattorneys. The nonattorney staff is divided equally between paralegals (24 percent) and other staff (25 percent).

“Let me give you an example. Our self-help center was closed one afternoon, and our judge spent over one hour explaining procedure to pro pers in the courtroom.”

—Court Administrator

8. Partnership Grant Evaluations

Origin of Partnership Evaluation Efforts

When the Partnership Grant Program started in 1999, there was little research about the efficacy of self-help assistance. While self-help services had been offered throughout the state for several years, many were concerned that it was not helpful for litigants. This program was seen as an ideal opportunity to ask projects to evaluate their activities and the effectiveness of their efforts to guide future funding. A group of experts in legal aid, self-help, and evaluation strategies developed a list of outcomes that they hoped would be achieved, and projects were encouraged to develop evaluation strategies to address these questions. These evaluation strategies have become national models.

Large Numbers of Litigants Assisted

The number of persons assisted by the partnership projects is truly remarkable. The projects employed, on average, less than one full-time equivalent attorney, while providing direct one-on-one assistance to more than 34,000 self-represented litigants.³² The ability to reach so many low-income litigants appears to be due to a number of factors, the primary one being the nature of the assistance, which generally consists of brief services and referrals. Other factors include the location of the projects in the courthouse, where many litigants naturally come for assistance, and the ability to serve all low-income persons who have a legal question avoiding the loss of significant amounts of time doing intakes and screening for conflicts.

Successful Partnerships With Courts and Local Organizations

As previously described, the partnership projects have been able to combine Equal Access Fund money with other funds to such an extent that, overall, non-Equal Access Fund grants and contributions account for more than half of project revenues (see Chart 22, above). This does not include additional in-kind assistance that the partnership projects may receive from the courts. Judicial officers interviewed by the Administrative Office of the Courts staff characterize the partnerships as having significantly increased the efficiency of the court and improved public trust and confidence in the court. All of the partnership staff who commented on the topic of relationships with the court reported that judicial officers and court staff were very pleased with the self-help center's performance, and felt that the center's services saved the court valuable time and resources by helping self-represented litigants better prepare pleadings, organize their evidence, and present their cases effectively. Many noted that the centers had been able to provide assistance to the court to help address more systemic issues caused by large numbers of self-represented litigants, such as coordinating calendars and identifying the need for bilingual staff.

Partnership projects report receiving 7 percent of their funding from community-based organizations and 7 percent from counties. Twelve

"This program has resulted in my being able to use the time I spend on the bench more efficiently."

—Superior Court Judge

"It's a 'win-win' for the court and for the pro per litigants."

—Court Administrator

³² Total litigants served, from all 16 projects reporting staffing data in 2003.

projects report serving 64,000 persons through a range of community legal education activities. Projects also report a wide range of referrals made to court, community, and other agencies (Chart 25).

Chart 25
Partnership Projects Making Referrals to Other Agencies

“Having a knowledgeable person to bounce their problem off of gives them some reality about the court. They have a lower anxiety level, which is readily apparent from the bench. They are calmer, understand better what is happening to them and can interact more effectively in the courtroom.”

—Superior Court Judge

Type of Referral	Number of Projects
Nonprofit legal aid provider	19
Social services agency	13
Family law facilitator	12
Private attorney (not pro bono)	9
Pro bono attorney	7
District attorney/police	5
Housing agency	4
Public benefits	4
Counseling/shelter	1
Other	6

Total number of projects reporting referrals = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Partnership Project Services Effective

Services to self-represented litigants result in high rates of customer satisfaction. All the projects measured customer satisfaction, with 15 of the 19 projects conducting customer exit surveys (see Appendix E, Progress on Self-Evaluation and Case Studies). Feedback from the self-represented litigants was reported as highly positive, with all but one project reporting that survey or other results indicated that self-represented litigants were satisfied with the assistance they received.³³

The projects themselves rated their impact as highest in the area of the self-represented litigants’ expectations and understanding of the legal process. Projects rated the reasonableness of customers' expectations of the legal process before their service at the partnership project as

³³ That project reported that most self-represented litigants “reported overall satisfaction with the service, explaining that they gained information about their legal rights, a better understanding of the court process, the resources available to them and how to access those resources.” It was somewhat less clear, however, whether litigants using that project felt their overall situation had improved as a result of going to the project.

extremely low. Thirteen of 19 projects rated customers' expectations before the service as either unreasonable or mixed. Only one project said that self-represented litigants' expectations before the service were reasonable. One project reported that most self-represented litigants "had little idea about what to expect, their rights or the merits of their case." Another noted that their customers "found the legal process 'vexing.' ... Many had received bad advice or had bad experiences in the past." For example, "one common misconception is that a restraining order can be obtained simply by calling the courthouse." Another common misconception concerned their expectations of the court: "Prior to the service, (the self-represented litigants') expectations tended to be unreasonably high regarding what a court could accomplish. Many people think that the court order will be able to change the personality and habits of their ex-partner, e.g., because the court has ordered that a father show up on time to pick up a child he will do so, or mothers who get an order for child support expect that they will automatically get the money owed them."

Projects also said that their service was able to change the self-represented litigants' expectations, although most confined this improvement to a better understanding of the legal process in general (Chart 26). A few projects reported the people served by the center had a more in-depth understanding of their particular case, but the limited nature of the services provided by self-help centers would generally not allow them to make a detailed assessment of individual cases.

Chart 26
Did Self-Represented Litigants' Expectations Change Following Assistance?

Change in Litigant Expectation	Number of Projects
Yes: Better understanding of the legal process	11
Yes: Better understanding of how the facts of their particular case might result in a positive or negative result	4
Unknown	4

Number of projects reporting = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Case Types Most Amenable to Self-Help Services

Projects were asked to list the types of legal problems that they thought were most appropriate for self-help assistance (Chart 27). Responding to an eviction action leads that list, along with filing an uncontested divorce, paternity or custody action, and requesting a domestic violence restraining order. Filing simple responses to a divorce petition and responding to an order to show cause were also mentioned as appropriate for self-represented litigants. Other legal problems amenable to self-help assistance included any simple, uncontested matter, filing proofs of service or judgments, civil restraining orders, small claims matters, modification of custody or visitation orders, and elder abuse restraining orders. It should be noted the projects offered opinions only about the types of legal issues handled by the project, so that a center that only handled family law matters did not comment on the appropriateness of self-help in the area of eviction responses.

Vicky, a low-income tenant, was the victim of identity theft. An unknown person had rented an apartment using Vicky's name and identification. The person had been evicted for failure to pay rent. The landlord sought to execute a judgment against Vicky and placed a lien on her wages.

The project helped Vicky file an emergency motion to have the lien removed promptly. If Vicky hadn't received this assistance, she would not have been able to pay her own rent, as her wages were frozen, and she might have become homeless as a result.

Chart 27

Legal Problems Reported as Amenable to Self-Help Services

Type of Legal Problem	Number of Projects
Eviction response	5
Uncontested divorce	4
Response to divorce	3
Paternity/custody	4
Domestic violence restraining order	4
Motion—temporary order	2
Response to motion	2

Total number of projects reporting = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

Case Types Less Amenable to Self-Help Services

Fewer projects responded to questions about legal problems that were not amenable to self-help. Of those that did, most frequently mentioned were cases involving complex legal or factual issues. Case types that were specifically mentioned were contested custody, discrimination, and debt collection. Several projects felt that guardianships were too complex for self-represented litigants to handle on their own, although many other projects reported successfully providing guardianship assistance.

For example, Public Counsel was able to assist self-represented litigants complete approximately 1,200 guardianships in 2003. Their evaluation found that guardianships of the person were appropriate for self-help assistance, and the clinic's assistance in particular was most beneficial to those who had difficulty understanding the paperwork and procedures (especially monolingual Spanish-speaking individuals, a majority of the clinic's customers). Guardianships or conservatorships of the estate were not generally amenable to low-income self-represented litigant assistance because they usually required a bond, which the bonding company in the courthouse would not grant to low-income litigants.

In addition to providing case types, the reports generally stressed that the feasibility of being able to self-represent effectively was the result of an interaction between three factors: the type and complexity of the legal issues, the factual complexity of the case, and the abilities of the party. Opinions varied about the effect of a fourth factor, the abilities or legal representation of the opposing party. Nonetheless, there is something of a consensus that the advisability of proceeding as a self-represented litigant should be determined by carefully weighing these factors rather than by looking at any one factor alone.

A final factor mentioned by several projects was the timing of the assistance. People who came in the day an answer was due, or even later, made rendering effective self-help assistance difficult or impossible.

Pilar came to the clinic with visible bruises inflicted by her husband and many emotional scars from the domestic violence she had experienced during 10 years of marriage. Attorneys met with Pilar many times over the following months until, in January 2004, she returned for her final judgment to be prepared.

By that time she had obtained a three-year restraining order, primary physical custody of the parties' three children, control of when and where the father's visits were to take place, and an order for \$1,439 per month, which enabled her to leave welfare. Pilar had a new energy and hope easily visible to the advocates. She was delighted with the assistance and said she could barely believe the outcome.

Models for Addressing More Difficult Case Types

As cases become more complex, the advisability of proceeding as a self-represented litigant diminishes. Slightly more complicated matters may simply call for more assistance, primarily forms preparation and follow-up visits to discuss how to proceed and the next steps to be taken. Projects felt self-represented litigants could handle somewhat more complicated matters if they got these slightly more elaborate services. Many projects also worked with their partner courts to identify systemic problems that could be addressed through changes in court procedure to make it easier for self-represented litigants to present their cases. By providing comments to the Judicial Council on forms changes, projects further worked to ensure that court processes became more accessible for self-represented litigants.

All projects also developed referral systems to help provide additional assistance to self-represented litigants who might be able to prepare their paperwork with the assistance of the partnership program, but they might need additional services such as strategic advice, help with negotiations, or in-court representation.

As projects develop ways to assist litigants with these more complicated cases, this information is being distributed to legal aid providers through educational seminars, meetings, and best practices resources.

“These programs fill a niche that we now couldn’t do without. You know you’ll always limp along somehow as we did before, with help from the local bar. But having a court program whose purpose is to help pro pers helps the court as well as the litigants—and ultimately saves the taxpayers money by saving time.”

—Court Administrator

Effective Assistance for Non-English-Speaking Litigants

With the large number of non-English-speaking litigants in California, the issue of how to provide effective and appropriate access to the courts is a critical one. All projects provided services to non-English speakers, and three of them focused primarily on services to Spanish-speaking litigants. The evaluation results indicated that these services were effective and allowed non-English-speaking litigants to proceed with their cases and obtain appropriate results in divorce and domestic violence matters.

Limited English proficiency was identified as a key reason for the need for services in addition to self-help assistance if litigants are to effectively represent themselves in court. In certain areas, such as domestic violence, if an interpreter is provided by the court, or in family law cases that proceed by default, it appears that self-help

services alone can be effective for non-English speakers in many cases. One other way that a number of projects were working to serve

Spanish and Vietnamese speaking litigants was to incorporate I-CAN!, an interactive software program that helps litigants complete common pleadings such as domestic violence restraining orders, fee waivers, and unlawful detainer matters by asking simple questions that are then entered onto the appropriate Judicial Council form. Each software module has been translated into Spanish, and the evaluation of that project indicates that 80 percent of Spanish speakers found it easy to use.³⁴ Part of that success is due to the fact that the questions are written in plain language and the project also utilizes video to ask the questions posed in English or Spanish, thus assisting persons with limited literacy.

One-on-One Assistance Most Effective

Projects almost uniformly responded that one-on-one assistance was the most, if not the only, effective assistance (Chart 28). In particular, one-on-one assistance was considered most useful for self-represented litigants with low levels of literacy. Other forms of assistance were mentioned as being effective primarily if offered in conjunction with one-on-one assistance.

Chart 28
Most Effective Types of Assistance

Type of Assistance	Number of Projects
One-on-one assistance	16
Introductory workshops	4
Written materials	3
Follow-up sessions	2
Other	1

Total number of projects reporting = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

A teenage mother came to the center, desperately trying to get help to find her one-year-old daughter who had been taken by the father. The woman had recently moved to California with the father and their daughter. After a few months, the couple broke up and the father disappeared with the child.

Not knowing where to get assistance, she came to the courthouse and was referred to the center. The center was able to assist her with the paperwork and get custody. She represented herself before a family law judge. She was able to argue her case persuasively and the judge awarded her sole custody. The father was found and the mother and daughter were joyfully reunited. The young woman now lives with her parents, where she and her child have a safe, stable home.

³⁴ This evaluation of the Legal Aid Society of Orange County's Interactive Community Assistance Network (I-CAN!) Project was authored by James W. Meeker and Richard Utman, University of California, Irvine, May 22, 2002.

Since few projects offered workshops, there was a limited basis for comparison between one-on-one services and workshops. It was often noted that workshops, written self-represented litigant packets, and other self-help materials were useful primarily as an adjunct to the individual assistance. Although they were felt to be useful, they were not seen as being sufficient to allow most self-represented litigants to adequately prosecute or defend their case in court. One project did mention, however, that workshops seemed more efficient when teaching self-represented litigants about filling out initial dissolution paperwork. Projects that surveyed the self-represented litigants about types of assistance they had received found that they preferred individual help.

Positive Effect of Services on Outcomes of Cases

Sixteen projects reported that properly completing forms at the center helped self-represented litigants become better prepared. More mixed results were reported by 2 projects based on court clerk impressions. The projects reporting that self-represented litigants had complete forms also reported anecdotal evidence that the cases of self-represented litigants who visited their center were less time consuming for bench officers and clerks. The other 2 projects reported more mixed results in that area as well.

Eleven projects reported that self-represented litigants using the self-help center were satisfied with their opportunity to make their case in court, while 3 projects said this outcome was mixed (generally depending on the judge), and 5 said they did not know.

“It has taken the heat off the clerk’s office—a relief to the staff. They are not faced with such long lines and questions they either can’t answer or are not sure they should answer—they can refer people to the self-help center.”

—Court Administrator

While 10 projects reported that people who were helped achieved better results, the remaining projects were not able to report on that issue. Very few projects were able to afford any meaningful outcome measurement system such as courtroom observations or follow-up interviews. Many noted that the better self-represented litigants understood their cases, the more likely they were to achieve a positive, or more positive, result.

One improvement in outcomes reported anecdotally by some projects was in landlord/tenant cases. The ability to file an answer to an eviction complaint can significantly improve the self-represented litigants’ chances of retaining their home.

A domestic violence restraining order clinic that was able to have an attorney observe self-represented litigants in court reported them to be “less nervous because they better understood the process, more satisfied with the opportunity to make their case, and better able to hold their own against the other side. Self-represented litigants were able to get restraining orders, live without violence, become more financially stable because of support, defend against allegations (that) no violence had occurred, and get fees waived where appropriate.”

Referral Networks for Those Who Could Not Be Served

Self-represented litigants who could not be helped were referred to other services. Most common among these was referral to a full-service legal aid organization. While legal aid is a referral used by almost all projects, it is not the only source of legal assistance. Lawyer referral services, the family law facilitator’s office, and pro bono projects are also significant sources of help used by many projects. Aside from more in-depth legal help, customers also come to self-help centers with nonlegal needs. These are reflected in referrals to social service agencies, counseling, shelters, public benefits, and housing agencies. Referrals to the local district attorney or police department indicate that some customers are crime victims. Finally, other referrals included conflicts panels of local bar associations, law libraries, family court services, and local mediation or conciliation services.

The most common reason given for referral was the complexity of the case (Chart 29). Referrals because of the subject matter of the legal problem and for reasons of language were made by most of the projects, indicating that there are unmet needs at the self-help center level that could be addressed with more funding. Special needs of the customer were reasons for referral to social service agencies. Other litigants are listed as being referred because of income ineligibility or because they requested a referral. A few projects reported referring customers because of lack of project resources, the other party having legal representation, and the degree of acrimony in the case.

Chart 29
Reasons for Referral

Reasons	Number of Projects Reporting Referrals
Complexity of case	14
Subject matter	10
Language needs	10
Special needs	9
Income ineligibility	5
Customer request	2

Total number of projects reporting = 19. Source: 2003 year-end project reports.

“Yes—we want to continue the program. If I didn’t have it, my life would be miserable.”

—Superior Court Judge

Evaluation Results Used to Improve Quality of Services

Providing court-based self-help legal assistance is a relatively new area of service, and the partnership projects have used the results of their evaluation to improve services to the public. For example, one project found out, from focus groups of litigants that they had assisted, that many litigants felt they were unprepared to present their case by themselves in court. As a result of this information, that program added a special workshop to help self-represented litigants prepare for court by role playing.

Another program found that one judge believed that the program was not effectively describing what would happen in court. Program staff attended court hearings, met with the judge, and was able to use this to establish a better working relationship with the judge and identify areas of miscommunication.