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Legal self-help center up and running

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Those who choose to represent themselves in cases at the Madison County Courthouse can avail themselves of a new self-help center that opened Thursday in the courthouse basement.

It opened at the Madison County Law Library, across from the jury room, with Chief Judge Ann Callis and several court officials attending.

"It's exciting for us," said Joan Spiegel, an attorney with the Land of Lincoln Foundation. "We've been turning people away because we just don't have the resources to represent everybody with problems, and it's nice to have another resource to send people to. Not everybody has a computer in their home, that's the biggest thing."

The center is funded, in part, by a grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation. Other funds came from individual corporations and law firms.

It has three computers, with Internet access and a printer. Donna Hobson and Connie Williamson will be on hand for 15 hours a week to help patrons navigate.

The computers will link to the county's homepage and have links to several other sites that offer tips for those going to court.

Users can get help by linking to Illinois Legal Aid Online at www.illinoislegalaid.org. "There's a video that tells people about going to court," Spiegel said. "What they need to expect when they get to court, how to dress, how to behave, what happens in court. They'll find out who the players are at the courthouse. Things like what the judges do, what a bailiff does. It really is meant to assist pro se patrons to navigate the courts."

Only three other circuits in the state have a self-help center for those representing themselves. ILAOL is a state-wide, non-profit organization that works as a state-wide technology center for legal services, said Lisa Colpoys, the agency's executive director. "Our mission is to use technology to increase access to the legal system," Colpoys said. "And we have some other videos such as going to small claims court and going to traffic court."

Colpoys added, "Our page is linked to free resources and other resources, and it gives you the address and phone number of Illinois Legal Aid Online. So it's not just the legal information, it's also resources for people getting legal representation."