

State's first free self-help facility opens in Rockford

The state's first formal Legal Self-Help Center had its grand opening on May 9 at the Winnebago County Courthouse in Rockford.

The center will provide current information about Illinois law and court proceedings to individuals who are not able to retain representation by attorneys. It will employ two part-time navigators.

The opening also marks the debut of a free automated order of protection system developed by Illinois Legal Aid Online for domestic violence victims and advocates.

"The Legal Self-Help Center should improve the administration of justice and make the courts more accessible to those individuals who are forced to represent themselves in court," said 17th Circuit Chief Judge Kathryn E. Zenoff, who has been appointed to the Appellate Court.

"Its initial focus will be to provide victims of domestic violence with access to a computer-based automated system that

will allow them to complete their own court forms using the format of a simple interview," she added.

"While the Legal Self-Help Center is not a substitute for representation by an attorney, the reality is that many individuals show up in court unrepresented," said Joseph A. Dailing, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice.

"Most of these people have few or no resources to hire counsel," he said. "They attempt to navigate the court system on their own without correct information and with an often incomplete understanding of the workings."

Funding for the center included a \$35,300 start-up grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation to Prairie State Legal Services.

The concept grew from a partnership formed a year ago by the 17th Circuit Court and the county circuit clerk to centralize available legal resources and make them more accessible to the public.

They were joined by Prairie State, the Winnebago County Bar Association, the Zeke Giorgi Legal Clinic of the Northern Illinois University College of Law, the Coalition for Equal Justice and Legal Aid Online.

The Community Foundation of Northern Illinois provided a \$1,500 grant for purchase of a computer and printer to

allow domestic violence office personnel to generate necessary court papers quickly and efficiently.

The center's self-help materials can be accessed by any Internet-connected computer from www.illinoislegalaid.org, a service of Illinois Legal Aid Online.

For more information about the self-help center, contact Dailing at (815) 962-9050.



Announcing the opening of a Legal Self-Help Center on May 9 in Rockford are (from left) Joseph B. Kosek of the Winnebago County Bar Association; Joseph A. Dailing, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice; Dean Leroy Pernel of the Northern Illinois University College of Law, and 17th Circuit Chief Judge Kathryn E. Zenoff, who has been assigned to the Appellate Court (see story on page 11).

New justice center built

Winnebago County's nearly completed Criminal Justice Center in Rockford is scheduled to be fully operational when its grand opening takes place Sunday, July 1.

The facility will include four courtrooms and judges' chambers, 13 pretrial services offices, a 1,200-inmate jail, the sheriff's department, a suite of five state's attorney's offices, and secured underground parking.

The circuit clerk will have an office to col-

for misdemeanor calls not in rooms 209 and 214 of the courthouse.

There will be jury boxes in Courtrooms A and D, and two large jury deliberation rooms. Each courtroom will have two small adjacent witness interview rooms.

The sheriff's facilities will contain 141 employees, sworn personnel and support staff; 236 corrections officers, a domestic violence unit, an evidence lab and a shooting range.