

Online aid available for those facing court

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BLOOMINGTON -- The area's chief judge says representing yourself in court can be confusing and frustrating, and she hopes a new computer system and a new assistant will help people find their way through the process.

"We encourage people to hire attorneys," said Chief Judge Elizabeth Robb said. "But as we all know, many people are not economically able to do that. So this legal self-help center will assist those persons who are attempting to represent themselves in court proceedings and perhaps then hopefully reduce the level of frustration for those people who are attempting to represent themselves."



Liz Barnhart, a computer navigator in the McLean County Legal Library and Self-Help Office in room 305B of the Law and Justice Center, uses a public access terminal as she logs into a site that allows anyone to research and file common legal issues. Thursday, July 12, 2007. The center uses a site developed by Illinois Legal Aid Online. (Pantagraph, David Proeber)

The online system will be used to get free legal forms and court procedure information through the Chicago-based Illinois Legal Aid Online, Robb said.

It can be accessed from any Internet-equipped computer, but terminals have been set up on the third floor of the McLean County Law and Justice Center, 104 W. Front St. The terminals will move to the sixth floor after renovations finish throughout the building, Robb said.

A part-time employee, Liz Barnhart, will be near the terminals to help people navigate the site.

The startup costs of the self-help center and Barnhart's salary are paid for through a \$10,000 grant from the Illinois Equal Justice Foundation and a donation from State Farm Insurance Cos., she said. Local funding will pay for it after the first year.

Most people in small-claims court represent themselves, Robb said. That includes cases such as those involving tenant-landlord disputes, evictions and sometimes foreclosures.

"A lot of times people are really at a loss to know what the law is and to know what types of legal forms they need to file," Robb said. "So the Illinois Legal Aid Online service was started several years ago, and the legal self-help centers are starting to be opened in other places around the state."

People at the Bloomington and Normal public libraries also were trained to use the Web site, and they have already helped people access the site for legal aid, Robb said.

The installation of the terminals is the result of a collaboration of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice, Illinois Legal Aid Online and the circuit clerk's office, Robb said.

Joseph Dailing, executive director of the Illinois Coalition for Equal Justice, said the site is primarily aimed at low-income people.

"While there's an automated divorce form on there, if you have a pension and property, it's not going to let you proceed because those are the kinds of things you're really going to need a lawyer to handle," Dailing said.

And Dailing said the question-and-answer format used to create requests for orders of protection can be less intimidating than the complicated paper forms. He said that can let advocates in domestic-violence cases spend less time on paperwork and more time on counseling people and helping them find shelter.

And he agreed with Robb the site may help reduce frustration with the legal system.

"People go into court, they don't understand what's happening, and they come out with a result they may or may not like," Dailing said. "They don't understand, and I think it undermines respect for the law. People feel like they don't have a fair shot at telling their story in court."

Lisa Colpoys, executive director of Illinois Legal Aid Online, said her organization's site has been up five years, but it was substantially revamped two years ago.

Colpoys said the Bloomington terminal is one of six being established this year, and eight more are planned for next year. One is expected to be installed sometime in Logan County.

On the Net

Online help now is available for people representing themselves in the 11th Judicial Circuit courts.

- The site tailored for McLean County: <http://mclean.illinoislegalaid.org>
- The general site: www.illinoislegalaid.org