

LOCAL

# Minnesota courts work to keep up with do-it-yourself demand

Help is just a walk-in center away for those braving the legal system without an attorney.

By Hannah Covington (<https://www.startribune.com/hannah-covington/6370465/>) Star Tribune |

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The stroke of a pen on a simple document sealed his marriage 10 years ago. Now, buried in paperwork and unable to afford an attorney, Luis Hernandez can't seem to get divorced.

"I thought it was going to be easier," he said. "But I still haven't gotten a divorce and it's been several months."

So Hernandez turned to a self-help legal center in Anoka County to figure out his next steps.

What began as a pilot program in 2015 to help people like Hernandez has since expanded to each of the 10th Judicial District's eight counties, which include the northeast metro area. Staff attorneys now keep hours and rotate among self-help centers in Anoka, Chisago, Isanti, Kanabec, Pine, Sherburne, Washington and Wright counties.

Minnesota's district courts are working to meet the demand for self-help services, fueled in large part by litigants' desire to save money and their own do-it-yourself ambition. That means launching more legal clinics and undertaking collaborations with bar associations and law libraries.

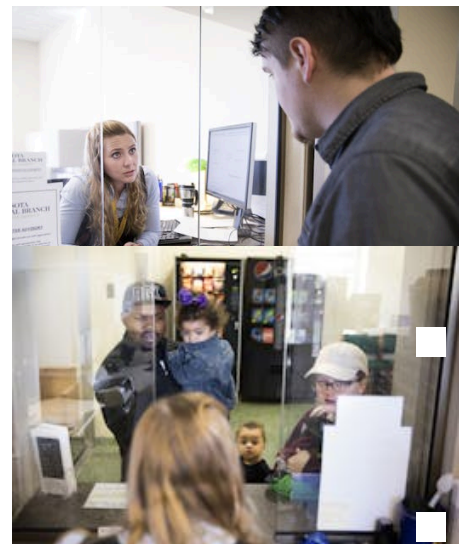
The 10th Judicial District effort marks the latest push to expand self-help legal center locations and provide in-person assistance for those braving the courts without an attorney.

While staffers do not provide legal advice, they do offer information on court procedures and help self-represented or pro se litigants get their legal forms in order, among other services.

Hennepin County District Court already runs two self-help centers in downtown Minneapolis, at the Government Center and the Family Justice Center. Ramsey County offers a self-help center for assistance strictly in family court matters. More than 53,000 people turned to the state's various walk-in centers last year.

Since 2007, the Minnesota Judicial Branch has also managed a statewide self-help center that offers assistance online, by phone and by e-mail.

The goal of these services is to increase access to the judicial system as well as move people through the courts more quickly, said Sara Gonsalves, manager of the statewide self-help center.



## Keeping the cases moving

It's not uncommon for pro se litigants to arrive at court with paperwork that's either the wrong form or filled out incorrectly. These kinds of mistakes can gum up the system, court officials say. Now judges can sometimes send people straight from the courtroom to a self-help center.

"It helps people feel like they've been heard," District Judge Bethany Fountain Lindberg said. "It also eliminates unnecessary hearings."

While the number of court cases overall in Minnesota has decreased since 2010, the percentage of litigants proceeding without a lawyer remains high. Excluding traffic and parking cases, nearly 80 percent of cases heard in Minnesota district courts last year involved a pro se litigant at some point, state data show.

The reason is often financial, court officials say. The rise of the do-it-yourself web culture may also be behind the trend.

"It used to be that everyone had attorneys," said Mike Moriarity, 10th Judicial District administrator. "Now there's a spirit that people want to try doing it themselves."

Anecdotal evidence abounds about the surge in pro se cases. But national data comparing state totals remains scarce. That's why the Court Statistics Project, part of the National Center for State Courts' research division, released [a 2013 report](http://www.courtstatistics.org/-/media/Microsites/Files/CSP/Other%20Pages/SRL%20Project%20%20Final%20Report%20121913.ashx) (http://www.courtstatistics.org/-/media/Microsites/Files/CSP/Other%20Pages/SRL%20Project%20%20Final%20Report%20121913.ashx) recommending state standards for defining and counting cases with pro se litigants.

The report's authors found that states don't count self-representation in the same way, if they count it at all. Once states begin using the same counting methods, the goal is to get a better grasp of what's happening nationally with pro se cases, said Shauna Strickland, a senior research analyst who helped write the report.

So far, only a handful of states have started reporting caseload data to the Court Statistics Project based on the report's recommendations, Minnesota among them.

## Minnesota tracking cases

In 2015, for instance, Minnesota reported that about 80 percent of its civil cases involved self-represented litigants — far and away the highest rate among states so far. By contrast, Indiana reported this figure as closer to 14 percent, the second-highest rate.

While it's too early to make much of these numbers with so few states reporting, it's this type of comparison that researchers are interested in, Strickland said.

"Maybe Minnesota is not such an outlier," she said.

In the 10th Judicial District, the bulk of DIY litigants come for help with civil and family law matters. For those looking for information on criminal cases, it's often about expungements or traffic tickets.

To keep pace with demand, the judicial district hired a second lawyer last year and expanded from its initial Anoka County location to all eight counties. The self-help center cost about \$170,000 this year, funded through the district's operating budget.

Staff attorneys helped people with 4,391 matters in 2016. That includes 90 visits to the center in Pine County, where 14 percent of residents live in poverty — the most in the judicial district.

"You don't have lawyers with a lot of offices here in Pine County, and a lot of people can't afford to hire lawyers," District Judge Krista Martin said.

In Anoka County, that's the situation that Hernandez found himself in when he went to get a divorce.

When Rashaad and Alicia Wren needed help with a custody issue concerning Alicia's children, they turned to the Anoka County legal self-help



Self Help Center attorney Molly Buckrey helps someone with questions at the Legal Self-Help Center. ] LEILA NAVIDI

Without an attorney and working through a language barrier, he came to court lacking the necessary paperwork. At the self-help center, attorney Molly Buckrey told him how to request a default judgment and printed out the 36 pages needed to do so.

"He was at a standstill," Buckrey said. "But he left here knowing exactly what steps to take to move his case forward."

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Rashaad Wren, left, his wife Alicia, right, with their daughter Bailee, 1, seek help on custody questions concerning Alicia's other children with