

Superior Court of California, County of Contra Costa**Virtual Self-Help Law Center**

www.cc-courthelp.org

Centro Virtual de Ayuda Legal

www.cc-courthelp.org/espanol

Contra Costa County Superior Court's on-line self-help center is one of the nation's most comprehensive court-sponsored sources of legal information available on the Internet. The court created the online self-help center to assist self-represented litigants and others wishing to become better informed about the law and court procedures. In November 2009, the court launched a Spanish-language version of the center, Centro Virtual de Ayuda Legal (www.cc-courthelp.org/espanol). These websites help the Judicial Council of California to meet its goal of ensuring meaningful court access for all Californians.

The English and Spanish sites each feature over 2,500 pages of information people need about court procedures, forms, and the step-by-step processes in the areas of:

- Adoptions
- Residential Evictions,
- Domestic Violence Prevention Orders,
- Guardianships,
- Divorce,
- Child Custody,
- Child Support,
- Spousal Support,
- Parentage,
- Small Claims, and
- Termination of Parental Rights
- Traffic Court

While the sites were developed by a county court, the law described is California law and so the content is valid State-wide.

What is the purpose of the Web sites?

Contra Costa County's Virtual Self-Help Law Center and Centro Virtual de Ayuda Legal provide the kinds of legal information sought most by the majority of people who represent themselves in California's courts. The Web sites are designed to help those without attorneys become better informed, navigate the court system with more success, and have more realistic expectations about the legal system. Although a wealth of legal information and resources is provided, the sites do not interpret the law, predict results, or provide legal advice on individual cases.

Why are the sites important?

Self-represented litigants often are disadvantaged in court because they are unfamiliar with court procedures and forms, as well as with their rights and obligations. Most Californians (76 percent) use a computer at home, work, or school, and 65 percent say they use the Internet. In addition, 25 percent of Californians speak Spanish at home, and 13.7 percent of Californians speak English “less well” than they do their native languages; a growing number of both populations are using the Internet.

The Virtual Self-Help Center and Centro Virtual de Ayuda Legal give self-represented litigants quick access to comprehensive information about many basic court procedures, resources, referrals to legal services programs, lawyer referral services, and other assistance.

What are some key features of the Websites?

Both the English and Spanish versions contain more than 1,000 pages designed specifically to help self-represented litigants navigate the court system. Users can find out about bringing a lawsuit, filling out court forms, alternative dispute resolution, free and low-cost legal assistance, and locating additional resources and information. Short videos and audiotapes are available to help explain some topics. The site also has a glossary of legal words and short sections on “How Courts Work,” and “You and the Court.”

Can a person ask specific questions?

All files in the Virtual Self-Help Center can be searched by word or phrase. But questions seeking legal advice or an interpretation of the law are beyond the scope of the assistance available from the Online Self-Help Center.

Can forms be filled out online?

All English-language Judicial Council forms can be filled out online at no charge. A person can then print them, sign them, and file them with the court.

Who are self-represented litigants?

More and more people are representing themselves in legal proceedings. The largest proportion of self-represented litigants is low income, according to the National Center for State Courts. And an increasing number of moderate-income Californians are similarly unable to afford an attorney and are forced to represent themselves. Others simply choose to proceed without an attorney when their cases do not appear to be complex.

The needs of self-represented litigants vary with the circumstances of the case. Some need an explanation of a simple procedure or assistance in completing court forms, while others may need more intensive and case-specific services related to the litigation process. On the website, people can get the level of help they want when they want it.

How many self-represented litigants are there?

According to data collected by California's Administrative Office of the Courts:

- Most of the 6 million annual traffic filings involve self-represented litigants;
- All of the nearly 400,000 annual small claims filings involve self-represented litigants;
- Of the estimated 94,500 child custody mediation cases handled by California courts each year, at least half involve one or more self-represented parents;
- Fewer than 16 percent of child support cases involve parents who both are represented by attorneys, and in more than 63 percent of child support cases, neither parent has representation;
- Ninety-seven percent of proceedings processed through the local child support agencies involve at least one self-represented parent; and
- A significant number of self-represented litigants are native Spanish speakers.

What does the law say about representing yourself in court?

California law does not require an adult court user to be represented by an attorney. In small claims cases, the law expressly prohibits a litigant from having an attorney.

What other help is available for people representing themselves in California courts?

While the courts, bar associations and legal services offices have developed a variety of assistance programs, some 67 percent of California's poor still do not have access to even basic levels of legal advice, information or assistance. For example, in California:

- There are 8,361 self-represented litigants for every 1 legal aid lawyer.
- Only one-third of the legal services needs of low-income Californians are met.
- Courts report that 80 percent of parties involved in family law disputes and 90 percent of those in landlord/tenant cases represent themselves.

Given these numbers, it is clear that this website and others are needed to provide Californians with some access to justice.

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