

DAY IN THE LIFE

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Self-Help Center Adapts to Virtual Environment to Help Self-Represented Litigants

By Stephanie McDonald, Esq.

When I first agreed to write this column, my theme was going to make the point that a typical “day in the life” of a self-help center attorney did not exist. Back then, the self-help center assisted roughly 200 self-represented litigants (SRLs) in person every day with legal problems that rarely involved a one-size-fits-all answer. Now, in the months following COVID-19, I am hard-pressed to describe a typical “hour in the life” now that my staff and I are helping 400 SRLs every day who are struggling to navigate an already overwhelming system from afar.

Let us start with my favorite day this year – February 28, 2020, the grand opening of the redesigned Family Law Self-Help Center (SHC) for the Eighth Judicial District. For those of you who have visited the center in the past, you know the former facility was small, cramped and in desperate need of an upgrade to assist the growing number of SRLs looking for legal help.

Thanks to court leadership, funding was secured to renovate the former protection order office into a bigger, better, multi-purpose center. On February 28, 2020, our years-long dream became a reality when we opened the doors to the public. Now there is an expanded computer lab, ample workspace for filling out forms, two staff desks to assist customers and a secure area where domestic-violence victims can work in quiet to apply for protection orders. The space allows our 10 staff, two attorneys, and on-site SafeNest advocate to assist approximately 30 people at a time. Every inch was



designed with our fast-paced, high-volume atmosphere in mind.

Fast-forward a few weeks later: the spacious, beautiful center is vacant. Our previous information-only phone line is now a phone tree ringing to staff working remotely. Our protection order staff are completing domestic violence protection orders for victims by spending an hour or more on the phone getting all necessary details. Others are patiently walking callers through our website, directing them to online forms and explaining the e-filing system so documents can get filed with a now-paperless court. The staff attorney

and I answer emails from litigants along with questions from staff posted on a central online chat.

After quickly assembling our virtual SHC to tackle the public’s immediate needs, we accelerated other projects

designed to give SRLs better access to the court. We updated nearly all of the forms at www.familylawselfhelpcenter.org to include e-signatures. We activated new online guided interviews at <https://nevada.tylerhost.net/SRL/srl/>, including a protection order interview, so SRLs could complete their legal forms faster and more accurately. Meanwhile, we fast-tracked the statewide Protection Order Forms Committee’s effort led by Nevada Supreme Court Justice Lidia Stiglich, resulting in a simplified set of new protection order forms that will be mandatory November 1.

Every day, the pandemic brings new challenges that require us to think in new ways about how to serve the public. Simple tasks for lawyers – e-signing, e-filing and e-serving to name a few – are not so easy for the average SRL. The “digital divide” is growing for those who lack technology and/or have limited literacy and English proficiency skills. For them, getting a pro bono attorney is their best hope for accessing justice. If you are reading this and have the time to help just one person, please reach out to a local legal aid center. The wait list is long, and many have nowhere else to turn.

My staff and I continue to work remotely while the court remains largely closed. Despite the challenges, I am inspired by the advancements already made and those yet to come. For I believe this is our moment to bring Socrates’ words to action: “the secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.”

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