

# Court Help Program Services

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

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The Court Help Program, administered by the Office of Court Administrator, provides self-help assistance to Montanans representing themselves in the civil justice system. The six self help law centers across Montana revolve around three pillars of resources: legal forms tailored for pro se litigants, legal information drafted by legal services providers or nonprofit organizations, and referrals to civil legal aid and pro bono programs for those who need legal advice. Thousands of Montanans have received assistance in the self help law centers .

Since 2011, when tracking of Court Help Program customers was started, customers have visited self help law centers 83,111 times; in 2017 there were more than 16,000 customer visits. All visitors to the centers complete an intake survey before any assistance can be provided (see Court Help Program Fact Sheet – Appendix A). Data from those surveys show that 67% qualify for assistance through Montana Legal Services Association (MLSA) and 83% qualify for Modest Means representation.

Center facilitators staff the Billings, Bozeman, Kalispell, and Missoula locations. The self help centers' limited staff resources receive a boost from the Program's seven AmeriCorps service members, who are part of the Justice For Montanans Program and typically serve one or two years each. In addition to AmeriCorps members, more than twenty volunteers provide varying levels of support throughout the Program.

## PRO SE FORMS

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Pro se forms are available to anyone on [courts.mt.gov](http://courts.mt.gov) or [montanalawhelp.org](http://montanalawhelp.org) for several areas, including:

- Dissolutions (divorce)
- Parenting Plans (custody)
- Minor guardianship
- Step-parent adoption
- Landlord-Tenant
- Orders of Protection
- Various civil procedural documents

Form development and implementation is a primary responsibility of the Access to Justice Commission's Forms Subcommittee and the Court Help Program.

Litigants have two options for filling out forms: write-in-the-blank or automated online. In every center, litigants can have forms printed off for them that they then fill in themselves by hand, which allows them to complete forms at their own pace or may accommodate any computer illiteracy. The option to complete certain forms online using auto-populating information is also available in self help law centers. This option is available for family law actions and orders of protection on [montanalawhelp.org](http://montanalawhelp.org).

We encourage every Court Help patron to return to the centers with their filled out forms prior to filing, so our staff can check the forms for completeness and assist organizing the filings.

## LEGAL INFORMATION

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Court Help Program staff and AmeriCorps members provide information, but not legal advice. The most circulated information is statutes from the Montana Code Annotated. Statutes might explain the contents of a petition for the adoption of an adult, the remedies for a tenant to pursue, or most often shared is the *Best Interest of the Child* statute that is utilized in a judge's decision on any parenting plan.

Brochures are a large source of information consumed in self help law centers. Montana Legal Services Association and the State Bar Association supply us with brochures educating the public on topics ranging from proper service methods of legal documents to domestic violence to services available to self-represented litigants. The centers also carry MontPIRG's Landlord-Tenant Guide, Montana State University Extension's resources on planning and settling estates, and Nolo publications such as *Represent Yourself in Court*.

The Court Help Program is working to create informational videos that will cover best practices for filing documents as a pro se litigant, services available at self help law centers, and basic filing processes. These videos will be made available in 2018.

## REFERRALS – COMMUNITY RESOURCES

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When litigants need legal advice or assistance, the Program refers them to civil legal aid providers or statewide and local resources.

### Nonprofits or Statewide Resources

On the back of the Court Help Program brochure litigants will find a list of statewide referrals to nonprofits and government agencies; the State Bar of Montana also has compiled a list of Statewide Montana Legal Resources. Information is provided for:

- Montana Legal Services Association
- State of Montana Law Library
- Office of Consumer Protection
- Child Support Enforcement Division
- Child and Family Services Division
- Montana State Extension
- Disability Rights Montana
- Montana Human Rights Bureau
- Lawyer Referral & Information Service
- Aging Services

Every Court Help Program patron receives a brochure so they have the contact information for all these services. With family law matters being the most common legal need, most referrals are to MLSA, Child Support Enforcement Division, or the State Bar's Lawyer Referral & Information Service.

### County Resources Guides

Nonlegal needs go hand-in-hand with the legal issues seen in the Court Help Program. Getting information for these nonlegal needs directly to self-represented litigants is the ideal solution, and the Court Help Program participates in an ongoing effort to make these resources more accessible. The

Justice for Montanans Program members compile yearly updates of county resources guides, which provide an inventory of community resources in every county. These resources are categorized into Child and Family Services, Disabilities, Domestic Violence Services, Food, Clothing, Health, Housing, Legal, Senior, Transportation, Veterans, Women's Resources, and Other.

Each resource guide has the community organization's contact information, web address, and summary of services. The Program is working to make this information available through a searchable database so anyone can search by location and topic to find resources in their own counties and communities. A good example is the Missoula County Resource Guide updated in January 2017 by the Missoula Self Help Law Center (Appendix B).

#### Pro Bono Services

Many litigants who need legal advice or assistance are referred to Montana Legal Services Association or local pro bono clinics or programs where available. For other Montanans who exceed pro bono service income guidelines, the Centers make referrals to the State Bar's Modest Means Program and Lawyer Referral & Information Service.