

**The Supreme Court of Montana**  
**Office of the Court Administrator**

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TO: Ryan Osmundson  
Governor's Budget Director

Rep. Bill Mercer  
Section D Interim Committee

FROM: Beth McLaughlin  
Supreme Court Administrator

RE: HB632 Quarterly Update

As required by HB632, Section 21, the Judicial Branch must report quarterly on program implementation, expenditure of funds, and measurable outcomes. The Branch was allocated \$944,721 in HB632 to streamline and expediate the processing of family law matters, which were delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding is supporting early mediation and simplified case processing for self-represented and low-income litigants.

The expenditure during the third quarter reflects the Project Administrator's salary and staff time from the service provider for the program, Montana Legal Services Association.

The program has two components:

**Informal Domestic Relations Trials (IDRTs):**

The Branch has implemented simplified domestic relations trials, which allow litigants to agree to an informal process that does not adhere to the formal court process, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Judicial District (Lewis and Clark and Broadwater counties), the 4<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Missoula and Mineral counties), and the 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Hill, Chouteau, and Liberty counties).

The following progress has been made:

- 20 IDRTs have been completed across all districts. IDRTs continue to be scheduled as parties and the Court consent.
- The Branch has continued to be in close contact with Judges and Standing Masters in all

pilot districts as the IDRT process becomes more integrated into the work of the Court. These conversations have led to refined processes, including greater integration of the Clerk's Office so that parties can be informed of this option as early as possible.

- The Branch held training sessions for all Self-Help Law staff, including the new 2022-2023 AmeriCorps members, and continues to seek new ways to educate potential parties about the process.
- One pilot judge presented about his experience with the program during the recent District Judges Meeting. The Branch hopes that this will encourage other districts to join the pilot.
- The Branch will soon invite representatives from key constituencies to join a new IDRT Advisory Group, seeking additional insight about how best to promote IDRTs as the reach of the program expands.

### **The Montana Family Transition Project:**

The Branch, through a contract with the Montana Legal Services Association, will provide family law mediators in certain cases where litigants meet financial requirements, are self-represented, and need a parenting plan as part of the domestic relations case. Through MLSA, litigants will also receive legal advice before mediation. The pilot districts are the 8<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Cascade County), the 13<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Yellowstone County), the 18<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Gallatin County), and the 19<sup>th</sup> Judicial District (Lincoln County).

The following progress has been made:

- The Montana Family Transition Project has officially launched. MLSA is accepting referrals from all pilot districts, and the team of 15 mediators is on standby. The Branch and MLSA will continue to develop processes and resources specific to the needs of each district as cases unfold.
- MLSA has contracted with 20 attorneys to provide advice to parties prior to mediation.
- The Branch has informed Self-Help Law Center staff about the launch of the program and anticipate that they will be significant referral source, especially for parties who have not yet filed and would like to work toward a joint petition. The new group of Justice for Montanans AmeriCorps members have been trained about the program and how best to promote it to parties who may be a good fit.
- The Branch will continue to pursue other community partnerships and sources of pre-filing referrals. For example, the Cascade County Law Clinic has agreed to allow the Program Administrator to promote the program by serving as a speaker for the new co-parenting classes in Great Falls.

Please let me know if you need additional information.

Cc: Justice Beth Baker  
Emma Schmelzer, Project Manager  
Cathy Duncan, Legislative Fiscal Analyst  
Montana Legal Services Association