

**Solutions on Self-Help Task Force
Request for Proposals (RFP)
Legal Self-Help Center Pilot Sites in Michigan**

RFP Date: Wednesday, February 1, 2012

Proposal Due Date: Wednesday, March 7, 2012

Proposal Format: Via Email Addressing Points Below to trippa@lsscm.org

Applicant: Government Entity; Nonprofit or Other Tax-Exempt Entity

Questions: Angela Tripp at trippa@lsscm.org or 734-998-6100 x 152

1. DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF SELF-HELP CENTER PILOT PROJECT

The Michigan Poverty Law Project (MPLP), as a contract vendor working with Michigan's Solutions on Self-Help Task Force (SOSTF), requests proposals for pilot legal Self-Help Center (SHC) sites in Michigan. The purpose of the Pilot Self-Help Center project is to help communities open (or sustain or expand pre-existing) legal Self-Help Centers that use the new statewide interactive pilot self-help web site "Michigan Law Help" which will be launched this spring. The Self-Help Centers will use the Michigan Law Help web site to:

- Provide access to legal information and court forms to individuals in Michigan who are representing themselves in court or need information about legal topics
- Provide court staff, librarians and others with a helpful resource to which they can refer self-represented litigants who need assistance
- Aid in the efficiency of court operations by providing self-represented litigants with access to quality legal information, access to computer programs which will assist them in properly completing specific court forms, and jurisdiction-specific procedural instructions for completing common and simple legal matters
- Provide referrals to local legal organizations, including legal aid agencies and the private bar, for individuals seeking an attorney
- Provide referrals to local community organizations, for individuals seeking non-legal assistance related to their legal problems

We invite courts, legal aid programs, bar associations, public libraries, law libraries, legal assistance centers, and others to apply to be a pilot SHC for this project. Applicants must be government, nonprofit or other tax-exempt entities. There must be a lead applicant entity, but proposals may involve coalitions or partnerships of stakeholders. Evidence of collaboration with key stake holders is required as explained herein. Proposals may be for a self-help center site to serve one county, or multiple counties, depending on size, population, and resources.

Three pilot sites will be chosen that reflect different types of communities, such as urban, rural, mixed.

2. BACKGROUND OF SELF-HELP CENTER PILOT PROJECT

This project is funded by a grant from the Michigan State Bar Foundation. In April, 2010, then Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly established the SOSTF to promote greater centralization, coordination and quality of support for persons representing themselves in legal matters in Michigan. The SOSTF contracted with MPLP to design, implement and oversee a project with two components: a) an interactive self-help website with an initial focus on the areas of family law, consumer law, expungement, and landlord/tenant law; and b) “self-help center in a box” tools and resources for establishing at least three local self-help centers based on the website.

The Pilot Project is funded through the end of 2012, but it is the goal of the SOSTF to work with the pilot Self-Help Center sites on sustainability plans to continue beyond that date. However, as this is a pilot project, we are expecting to learn lessons during the pilot phase which may lead to modifications in the future or can help promote the establishment of additional Self-Help Centers affiliated with the statewide Michigan Law Help web site.

The SOSTF requires that these local Self-Help Centers are to use the Michigan Law Help web site as the basis for the content covered by the web site for several reasons. First, resources are targeted to the web site to assure it has up to date, quality content, including local information to facilitate referrals to lawyers and community organizations. In this way, localities do not have to create their own content or manage updating it, making it user friendly and address literacy levels. Also, uniform training and other support to help personnel provide quality assistance to patrons of the Self-Help Centers will be provided by MPLP.

3. SELF-HELP CENTER SITE SPECIFICATIONS

A. Proposed location: Ideally, each SHC will be located in a space convenient to the public, such as a courthouse law library or other dedicated room in a courthouse, in a public library or a community center.

Please indicate where your proposed SHC will be located, and give details about the size of the space, accessibility, ease and availability of parking or access by public transit, and other details that make it a desirable site.

B. Technical requirements: Each SHC must have one or more workstations (computer, monitor, keyboard, and mouse); printer; headphones for each workstation; high speed internet connection; and a privacy screen for each monitor/workstation. Recommended technical specifications are attached. For larger self-help centers with a high volume of traffic expected, more workstations will be necessary. As noted below, some funding may be available if needed for equipment, but all workstations will be the property of the court or library where the center is housed, not the property of MPLP or of the SOSTF.

Please indicate in your proposal how many workstations you would propose for your site, and whether these workstations already exist or whether they will need to be acquired in order to open the SHC. Please also explain how you will ensure users' privacy while they are using the workstations (i.e., privacy screens between workstations, separate rooms for workstations, etc.).

C. Stakeholders: In order for a SHC to be successful, a site must have a **local planning committee**. It is typically beneficial if this group is chaired by a key leader such as a chief or other judge, or another lead stakeholder. Members of the committee should include other major local stakeholders, including (but not limited to): local legal aid organization(s); judiciary and clerk staff from the jurisdiction(s) the site will serve; the local bar association; county board; domestic violence survivor advocate groups; and other social or civic community organizations. Other community partners should be recruited as stakeholders, even if they do not serve on your planning committee. See Roles of Stakeholders section below for more information.

For each site that is selected by the SOSTF to host a pilot SHC, that site's local planning committee is responsible for working with MPLP to complete the SHC planning process. The planning committee chair must assure that the necessary partners are invited and engaged, and facilitate the planning process (with assistance from MPLP). Each site plan will include strategies identified by the local planning committee to build sustainable funding for the SHC to continue after the pilot period and, if needed, during the pilot period.

Please outline your proposed local planning committee and list other community partners and stakeholders who are committed to the project – we are looking for a breadth of contacts and depth in collaborative efforts with these partners. Please also submit two or three letters of commitment from community partners and stakeholders. Please identify which stakeholder is the lead applicant that will be primarily responsible for handling the financial aspects of the SHC (i.e., which stakeholder will employ the navigator if the site has a designated navigator, handle purchasing of equipment and supplies, annual accounting, etc.).

If your proposed site is going to serve multiple jurisdictions, please include representatives from all jurisdictions on the planning committee and as community partners.

D. Navigators: Navigators are non-lawyers who assist SHC users with using the Michigan Law Help website and provide other appropriate assistance. They do not give legal advice. In Illinois, where this model has been operational for more than 10 years, frequently the SHC is located in the law library where the law librarian helps patrons navigate the web site. In smaller locales, public librarians sometimes fill that function in public libraries. Larger SHCs with a high volume of expected visitors often have one full time or two part-time navigators with smaller sites using one part-time navigator with set hours posted.

If a site is going to be located in a staffed library, that site may opt to train library staff to act as navigators to assist patrons with the web site. Potential sites are encouraged to think creatively about who might be good navigators – whether existing staff may fulfill a navigator position, or whether your area has paralegal or law students who could serve as interns, externs, or volunteers (although all students must be supervised, and reminded not to give legal advice). Staff who are navigators are employees of the SHC or the entity where the SHC is housed, not of MPLP or of the SOSTF.

Please explain how your site will be staffed, and who will supervise the navigators.

E. Plan for sustainability: Each potential SHC site needs to outline a plan for long-term sustainability of the site and the costs associated with operation of the site, including navigators, occasional computer/printer upgrades and maintenance, and office supplies. The SOSTF will assist with sustainability planning and will also assist the selected pilot sites with start-up costs and equipment costs (see below), with a possibility for additional stipends where those are necessary. However, proposing sites must demonstrate some capacity for long-term sustainability and/or fundraising for the future of the SHC. Michigan's existing self-help centers have found that local investment not only helps residents and courts but in the end can save funding. In Grand Rapids, a study showed that the Legal Assistance Center saved the equivalent of 2 or more court staff's time in trying to assist self-represented litigants. In Illinois, more than ¾ of their 100+ counties now have SHC sites affiliated with their statewide pro se web site.

Please include a proposed SHC budget for the remainder of 2012 in your proposal, and suggest how your SHC could be sustained in the future. We suggest proposing sites refer to the following to determine estimated costs of operating the site: the technical specifications attached; potential costs related to space for the SHC; hourly wages of county employees or librarian staff to determine costs of navigator, and a small budget for office supplies (paper, pens, etc.). Note whether these costs are already covered, such as library personnel who will assist patrons and is already on staff as part of the library budget.

F. Commitment to Michigan Law Help website and uniformity: One primary goal of the SOSTF and this pilot project is uniformity and efficiency. This includes using existing resources to maintain high quality materials and a user friendly website so that its products are updated and trustworthy. Because the self-help centers are based on the Michigan Law Help web site, all stakeholders **must** be committed to using the site and its materials at their SHCs. This means that the Centers must **not** distribute other versions of materials that are available on the site or create or use their own web pages covering those topics – they must instead use the materials that are on the Michigan Law Help site. This will remain true as the pilot project expands and additional materials are available on the site. The SOSTF and MPLP will assist SHC sites in developing a customized local home page which leads to the statewide web site.

Centers and court staff must also agree to help MPLP keep the new statewide website up to date by providing MPLP with information upon request or advising MPLP should local procedures change. Furthermore, all courts related to the SHC site **must** accept pleadings produced using the site. All court forms used on the site will be SCAO-approved.

This also includes a commitment to the statewide branding protocols, and the evaluation protocols for the pilot project, which will be used to evaluate each self-help center for the duration of the pilot project and also for future planning purposes. Each SHC which is staffed will be expected to keep statistics concerning number of users, types of materials accessed, and other statistics according to protocols developed by the SOSTF. MPLP will provide training and assistance to help SHC sites accomplish this.

It also includes agreement to assist in developing and complying with quality assurance protocols or guidelines for the operations of SHCs in Michigan. In addition, all selected sites will participate in the evaluation of the pilot effort.

G. Demonstrated Need: What is particular to your proposed SHC service area that makes getting a SHC important? What is unique about your county/ies and its residents that makes their need particularly compelling? How many patrons do you expect your proposed SHC to serve each month? How did you reach that estimate?

4. ROLES OF STAKEHOLDERS

In addition to participating in the local planning committees related to their local SHC, individual stakeholders have other suggested roles, which are outlined below:

Community partners: Community partners are integral to the planning and success of the legal self-help center. These partners may include the local bar association, county board, domestic violence survivor advocate groups, other social or civic organizations. The SHC staff relies on these partners for continuing support in raising public awareness so that the center continues

to provide free legal information to vulnerable community residents. Community partners also refer clients to the SHC and help provide information about local organizations to the website to assist with legal and non-legal referrals.

Public library: Particularly in rural counties, the public library is often the only place that provides public access computers with fast and reliable internet access. These libraries are also usually open when the courthouse is closed. Librarians can be natural “navigators” who are accustomed to providing the public with information, but not legal advice.

Local legal aid organizations: A SHC’s local legal aid organization is an essential component of the legal services delivery system to low-income residents, senior citizens, and the disabled. If a Center patron fits in any of these populations, he/she may be able to obtain legal advice and representation from a local legal aid attorney.

Bar associations and lawyer referral services: Local bar leadership and assistance in educating bar members is essential to the success of each SHC.

Judiciary and court clerks: They are key partners in setting up a legal SHC and continued operations of the SHC. Without their support, the Center will not be successful. Both have a continuing role in promoting the SHC and ensuring that the legal self-help center continues to operate efficiently whether or not the SHC is located at the court. Clerk staff are encouraged to distribute a one-page handout with legal assistance referral information to distribute to pro se litigants (hand-outs will be provided to SHC sites for this purpose).

Human Services Organizations: Local community organizations can often direct their patrons to legal self-help resources, including the website and SHC, and they can help identify emerging needs and also receive referrals of self-represented litigants who have collateral non-legal issues related to their problem.

Michigan Law Help/MPLP: MPLP (or any successor after the conclusion of the pilot project) is responsible for the Michigan Law Help web site, upon which each local SHC is based. MPLP is also responsible for the development of each SHC site’s local SHC homepage. MPLP will provide ongoing training and support to SHC partners including navigators, court and clerk staff, librarians, DV advocates, etc.

5. THINGS TO BE PROVIDED BY SOSTF AND/OR MPLP

MPLP will assist the local planning committee with the SHC planning process – helping to identify key partners, convene meetings, etc. MPLP will also provide materials and support needed to open each SHC. This includes designs and text for signage, brochures and other publicity for the SHC, press releases, text for county board resolutions, sample job descriptions

for navigators, etc. MPLP will guide each local planning committee through the process of setting up their pilot site. MPLP will also create a specific web landing page for the statewide website for each SHC.

MPLP will provide initial and ongoing training for the SHC navigators, and ongoing technical support for the SHCs for things related to the website. MPLP will not provide technical support for the equipment in the SHC.

A limited amount of funds are available to help with start-up costs. This could mean equipment for a site, or funds for printing promotional materials, or other start-up costs that a site needs. Funds from a total pool of about \$15,000 may be used to assist the chosen SHC sites during the pilot period. If your site does not need financial help to participate as a pilot site, please indicate that in your proposal so that, if you are selected, we can allocate these funds to other sites that need help. Please indicate whether you request a portion of these funds, the amount requested and what they would be used for, e.g. to help defray operating or other costs for the pilot period upon a demonstrated need, equipment, or something else. The site's longer term sustainability strategy should also be outlined as it will be considered when the SOSTF is selecting SHC sites for the pilot project.

6. FORMAT AND DEADLINE FOR PROPOSALS

RFP responses should be emailed to Angela Tripp at trippa@lsscm.org by March 7, 2012. Questions regarding the proposal or the process can also be directed to Angela at trippa@lsscm.org or 734-998-6100 x 152.

Proposals should address all points noted above and affirmatively state a commitment to the SHC responsibilities noted herein. Proposals should also provide any additional information you think the SOSTF should know when making the decision about where the pilot sites will be hosted.

7. PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS and PROJECT TIMELINE

The Self-Help Center subgroup (a sub-group of the Pilot Project Advisory Group, which is part of the SOSTF's Work Group A) will review proposals, and conduct follow-up interviews with selected SHC applicants. The subgroup will then make a recommendation to the full SOSTF. It is expected that the SHC choices will be made in March and that each will begin to operate by June 15, 2012 and continue through the remainder of the pilot period ending December 31, 2012.