

Court Assistance Services

Report to Governor Butch Otter
and the
1st Regular Session
of the 60th Idaho Legislature



IDAHO SUPREME COURT

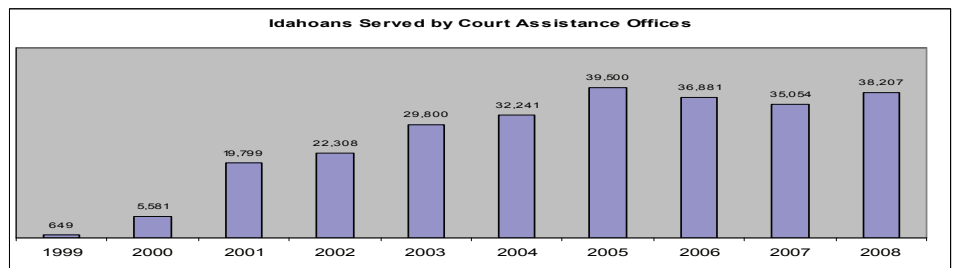
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The Demand for Court Assistance Services Remains High

The number of Idahoans who receive court assistance services remains high. In 2008, over 38,000 persons obtained help directly from court assistance officers at county courthouses throughout the state. This figure is down slightly from a peak of 39,500 in 2005, as those who need services turn to the internet and the Court's Self-Help Website for assistance to avoid having to travel to the nearest courthouse. This website was accessed 2,127,510 times by 229,128 different users between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008. The most frequently visited topic continues to be court forms, primarily in family law cases. The interactive versions of those forms, which use guided interviews to help the user complete the forms, remain a popular option for assistance. These forms have been accessed over 100,000 times since the first form and interview became available in May of 2006. The number of visits per month has now risen to over 4,600.

The number of Idahoans turning to the court for help in understanding how to seek an effective resolution to their legal disputes reflects not only the success of this program, but also the great need for these types of services. The expression of public support and appreciation will drive greater efforts to provide improved services in underserved areas and to remove language and other barriers which impede access to justice.



Note: these figures do not include persons using the CAO Website or Interactive Court Forms

Idaho Interactive Court Forms Project Concluded

The Idaho Interactive Court Forms Project, a joint effort between the courts and Idaho Legal Aid Services that began in January of 2005, has now been completed. The last, but most complex interactive interview, which assembles all of the necessary court pleadings and documents for a divorce proceeding involving custody and child support issues, is now online. This form has been the most requested and eagerly awaited of all of the interactive forms since the greatest level of self-representation occurs in this particular area of family law.

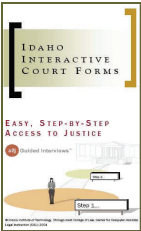
As a result of this Project, 32 guided interviews are available to help automatically assemble 160 court forms using the A2J Graphic Interface developed by Chicago Kent College of Law and the Center for Computer-Assisted Legal Instruction. Five of these interviews are also available in Spanish. These forms and interviews are maintained on the national document assembly server (NPDAO), a resource which is provided at no charge to legal service organizations who provide assistance to persons of limited means. Over 16,000 forms have been completed and compiled by the automated program in a year's time between July 1, 2007 and June 30,

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2008. This number of assemblies puts Idaho at 3rd in the nation for number of assembled court documents for pro se litigants, trailing only California and Illinois. One evaluation, which tracked the actual filing of only 16 of the more frequently accessed forms over a one-year period, showed that 1,408 different individuals filed 2,068 forms created through this project. At least one or more forms were filed in each of Idaho's 44 counties which confirms the potential of this technology to provide services to the more distant and rural areas of the state. The project was recently featured as a model project at the 2008 National Center for State Court's Court Solutions Conference in Baltimore, Maryland.

Collaboration with ILAS to Continue on Other Projects

Following the success of the Interactive Court Forms Project, other joint efforts between the courts and Idaho Legal Aid Services are underway. One project will involve a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of the interactive court forms in increasing meaningful access to the courts. A second project will incorporate streaming videos into the interactive guided interviews which provide more effective instructions on the completion of the forms and court procedures. In addition, there will be continued participation by the Senior Legal Advisory Committee which is developing special interactive forms needed by Idaho's senior citizens, and the revitalization of the Senior Hotline which provides legal assistance to all seniors over the telephone. In the past year, court assistance officers referred 225 seniors to this resource.



Ada County Court Assistance Office Expands

David Navarro, Clerk of the District Court for Ada County and a long-time supporter of court assistance services, has allocated space for a separate office for court assistance at the Ada County Courthouse. Future plans include adding an additional part time or full time deputy court clerk to the current staff of one attorney and one deputy court clerk when additional funding becomes available. Computer work stations will be provided in the office so the public can access forms and instructions over the internet while having the CAO staff available to answer questions and provide assistance as needed.

As the most populated of Idaho's 44 counties, Ada County provides direct court assistance services to over 1,500 persons a month during peak months and its local self-help website receives an average of over 15,000 visits each month. In responding to the increasing need for court assistance services, David Navarro, an original member of the Idaho Supreme Court's Committee to Increase Access to the Courts and recipient of the Court's 2006 Kramer Award for outstanding service in court administration, has set the standard for providing meaningful access to courts in Idaho as a Clerk of the District Court.

Evaluation of Court Assistance Services in Progress

John Greacen, a nationally recognized expert in court administration and in the evaluation of court programs which serve self-represented litigants, is in the process of evaluating court assistance services throughout Idaho. Ten counties were selected as representative sites based upon population, geographic location, and model for service delivery. At these sites, court clerks, court assistance officers, court administrators, judges and members of the public will be surveyed about their experience with self-represented litigants and the services which are provided to them. Focus groups will be conducted to assess actual experiences of those seeking or using court assistance services, and on-site visits will be made to courthouses, during which input will be obtained from judges and court staff. The results of the evaluation will be officially presented at the next meeting of the Committee to Increase Access to the Courts, and will guide that Committee in setting future goals for improving access to the Courts.

Focusing on Services for Rural Counties

Idaho's efforts to address the need for court assistance in rural counties through district wide service models and interactive forms were recently highlighted at a conference on *Improving Rural Courts: a Networking Approach* presented by the Justice Management Institute in Coeur d'Alene in June of 2008. Representatives from a number of states with very rural counties attended, including Alaska, Nevada, Washington, Nebraska, North Dakota, New York and Montana. Although many positive comments were made about Idaho's efforts, the Idaho team has recommended additional efforts to address the special needs of its rural counties in a number of different areas, including court assistance. In particular, increasing the use of technology to improve the delivery of services to rural areas was listed as a high priority.

New pilot projects are under consideration that will help identify and deploy various forms of technology such as video conferencing, which will allow court assistance officers to provide the same types and level of services remotely to rural counties over the internet without having to travel great distances in the district. The goal is to ensure Idahoans in rural areas receive the same services that are available in more urban areas.