

Michigan Legal Help Program
Request for Proposals (RFP)
Legal Self-Help Center Sites in Michigan

RFP Date: Monday, May 20, 2013

Proposal Due Date: Rolling

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 THE MICHIGAN LEGAL HELP PROGRAM

The Michigan Poverty Law Program (MPLP), as project manager of the Michigan Legal Help Program, requests proposals for Self-Help Center (SHC) sites in Michigan. One purpose of the Michigan Legal Help Program is to help communities open (or sustain or expand pre-existing) legal Self-Help Centers that use the Michigan Legal Help website as a primary resource. The Self-Help Centers will use the Michigan Legal Help website 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 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 lawyer referral services, 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 Michigan Legal Help-affiliated SHC. 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 stakeholders 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.

2. BACKGROUND OF MICHIGAN LEGAL HELP PROGRAM

The Michigan Legal Help Program is funded in part by a grant from the Michigan State Bar Foundation. In April, 2010, then Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly established the Statewide Solutions on Self-Help Task Force to promote greater centralization, coordination and quality of support for persons representing themselves in legal matters in Michigan. One result of the SOSTF is the Michigan Legal Help website and its affiliated self-help centers. While the SOSTF was dissolved at the end of 2013, The Michigan Legal Help Program (MLH) continues on as the overall effort to expand, enhance and coordinate assistance for self-represented persons in Michigan. It consists of the statewide interactive website MichiganLegalHelp.org, affiliated local self-help centers, and partnerships with courts, bars, libraries, legal aid and others to educate those who serve the self-represented.

The Michigan Legal Help Program (MLH) is looking for at least eight new Self-Help Center sites at this time. These Self-Help Centers must use the Michigan Legal Help website as the resource for legal information for those areas covered by the website. This is because resources are targeted to the website 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 or update their own content, making it user friendly and addressing low literacy levels. Also, MLH provides uniform training and other support to help personnel provide quality assistance to patrons of the Self-Help Centers.

3. SELF-HELP CENTER SITE SPECIFICATIONS

A. Proposed location: 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.

In your proposal, 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 and equipment will be the property of the entity where the center is housed, not the property of MPLP or MLH.

Please indicate in your proposal how many workstations you 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 to host a SHC, that site's local planning committee is responsible for working with MLH 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 MLH). Each site plan will include strategies identified by the local planning committee to build sustainable funding for the SHC to continue after any initial funding provided by MLH. If your proposed site is going to serve multiple jurisdictions, please include representatives from all jurisdictions on the planning committee and as community partners.

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.).

D. Navigators: Navigators are non-lawyers who assist SHC users with using the Michigan Legal 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. 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 website. 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). Navigators are employees of the SHC or the entity where the SHC is housed, not of MPLP or MLH.

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 MLH will assist with sustainability planning and will also assist the selected sites with start-up costs and equipment costs (see below), with a possibility for additional stipends where 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 costs for courts. 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, every county now has a staffed SHC affiliated with their statewide client web site.

Please include a one year SHC budget in your proposal, and suggest how your SHC could be sustained in the future. We suggest referring 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 Legal Help Website and Uniformity: One primary goal of the Michigan Legal Help Program 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 Legal Help website, 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 Legal Help site. This will remain true as MLH expands and additional materials are available on the site. MLH will assist SHC sites in developing a customized local home page which leads to the statewide website.

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

This also includes a commitment to the statewide MLH branding protocols, and the evaluation protocols for MLH, which will be used to evaluate each self-help center and also for future planning purposes. Each SHC will be expected to keep statistics concerning number of users, types of materials accessed, and other statistics according to protocols developed by MLH. MLH 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 MLH. These requirements, and other information, are contained in the Michigan Legal Help Self-Help Center Operation Protocols attached.

In your proposal, please include a statement of commitment to these principles.

G. Demonstrated Need: What is particular to your proposed SHC's service area that makes getting a SHC important? What is unique about your county and its residents that make their need particularly compelling? How many patrons do you expect the 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, and 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. SHC sites located in courts may want to also consider opening additional satellite SHC offices in local libraries.

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. Additionally, legal aid organizations will be a source of referrals to the SHC for those clients they cannot serve.

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 Legal Help Program: MLH is responsible for the Michigan Legal Help website, upon which each local SHC is based. MLH is also responsible for the development of each SHC site’s local SHC homepage. MLH 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 THE MICHIGAN LEGAL HELP PROGRAM

MLH will assist the local planning committee with the SHC planning process – helping to identify key partners, convene meetings, etc. MLH will also provide materials and support needed to open each SHC. This includes signage, brochures and other publicity for the SHC, press releases, text for county board resolutions, sample job descriptions for navigators, etc. MLH will guide each local planning committee through the process of setting up their SHC site. MLH will also create a specific web landing page for the statewide website for each SHC.

MLH will provide initial and ongoing training for the SHC navigators, and ongoing technical support for the SHCs for things related to the website. MLH 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 \$30,000 for 2013 may be used to assist the chosen SHC sites. If your site does not need financial help to participate as an MLH-affiliated site, please indicate that in your proposal so that if your proposal is 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 first year of operations 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 MLH is selecting SHC sites.

6. FORMAT AND DEADLINE FOR PROPOSALS

RFP responses should be emailed to Angela Tripp at trippa@lsscm.org on a rolling basis. 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 MLH should know.

7. PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS and PROJECT TIMELINE

The Michigan Legal Help Program, with assistance from the MLH Self-Help Center sub-committee, will review proposals, and conduct follow-up interviews with selected SHC applicants before deciding which sites will be opened. It is expected that the SHC choices will be made within 6 weeks of the date the proposal is submitted, and that all sites will begin operation within 3 months of that date.