

New



Dollar-a-minute legal advice program opens at Lee Courthouse

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(Photo: NEWS-PRESS STAFF PHOTO)

After centuries of stumbling in the dark seeking answers, people with legal issues but no legal representation finally have a way to shed light on the often arcane world of the Lee County court system.

A self-help program, offering basic legal guidance on the court system, has been opened at the downtown Fort Myers courthouse.

Help with filling out paperwork is available daily.

People with small claims and eviction issues can consult a lawyer from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays for advice on how to navigate the system and confront the legal issues ahead.

More: [Some help for small claims debtors \(/story/news/2017/08/14/some-help-small-claims-debtors/560253001/\)](/story/news/2017/08/14/some-help-small-claims-debtors/560253001/)

More: [Fort Myers Council's inaction leaves city in a tough legal spot \(/story/news/2017/11/16/fort-myers-councils-inaction-leaves-city-tough-legal-spot/848933001/\)](/story/news/2017/11/16/fort-myers-councils-inaction-leaves-city-tough-legal-spot/848933001/)

More: [Lee clerk suggests dollar-a-minute legal help desk \(/story/news/local/2017/01/10/lee-clerk-suggests-dollar--minute-legal-help-desk/96256552/\)](/story/news/local/2017/01/10/lee-clerk-suggests-dollar--minute-legal-help-desk/96256552/)

County Clerk Linda Doggett has initiated a legal self-help center in the courthouse that will pair attorneys with people who need help. People pay a dollar per minute of attorney time, with a minimum charge of \$15.

"The idea is so that they are better prepared for court, that they're more knowledgeable about what they are doing," Doggett said. "They go into a consultation room where they can ask questions about what kind of information they need, what will happen next in the courtroom and consult with the attorney on different things they need to know."

Doggett has worked for the past couple years on the idea, freeing up space formerly used for storing paper files and recruiting Florida Rural Services, the Lee County Bar Association and the Legal Aid Society to make lawyers available.

The need for such a service originated in the lines at the intake counters in the courthouse, and the number of people with legal issues to pursue or defend who didn't know how to fill out the forms, let alone present the pertinent facts to a judge.

"Often what you'll find is that there are clerks who are being asked questions about how to fill out particular forms, and they want to answer the question, but they're restricted from doing so," said Fort Myers attorney Andrew Banyai, executive director of the Lee County Legal Aid Society Inc. "Self help will allow us to assist people who do have some of those issues."

The self-help center includes computers the public can use to help file and respond to litigation and track the progress of cases on-line.

Lawyers will provide advice but won't undertake courtroom representation. With the help of office technology, both suits and answers to suits can be framed clearly, reducing procedural confusion that can clutter the proceedings.

"The judges like it, they're not struggling to read someone's handwriting, the forms are more complete," Doggett said. "They have a better opportunity to do their job."

Self-help means the lawyers will essentially coach people but will not be in the courtroom.

"It is an opportunity for us to do something that the Legal Aid Society in any community should do, and that is just educate the community," Banyai said.

"To set up in the courthouse and have an avenue to speak directly to people, that is just fantastic."

Ethical rules for lawyers mean people using the program will acknowledge an understanding of the limited scope of the lawyer's work. Lawyers in the program will have to keep careful track who they advise so they don't give advice to both sides in the same matter.

"We're going to give them advice on what we think they should do, but it is ultimately up to them what they do because we can't directly represent everybody who walks into the self-help center," Banyai said.

As The News-Press previously reported, dozens of people are called weekly into small claims sessions to answer suits seeking to collect debts bought and sold by various investors. Litigants are often herded into mediation sessions and given take-it-or-leave-it settlement offers.

More: [Debt collectors flex muscle in people's court, system not much help to people who owe \(/story/news/2017/08/04/sxdx/484768001/\)](/story/news/2017/08/04/sxdx/484768001/)

Self-help centers will mean many of those people understand the procedures that apply in the courtroom.

"If you have one side and they have a lot of resources and the ability to pay for a lawyer to do a whole bunch of things, they can certainly overpower somebody who doesn't have that knowledge of the legal system and doesn't have those resources," Banyai said. "Anything we can do to help level that playing field is going to result in more justice for the community."

The Legal Aid Society is still working through the guidelines for its participation but finds the concept is aligned with its objective of justice for all.

Lee Court Self Help

Place: Lee Courthouse, Monroe Street entrance.

Services: Electronic filing, file small claims, get documents notarized, search court files.

Advice: Attorney available by appointment for consultation on small claims and evictions.

Appointments: 239-533-5000. Available 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays

Fee: \$1 per minute, minimum \$15 for 15 minutes.

Not provided: Courtroom representation.

Domestic cases: Handled by Family Court Services.

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