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Court Assistance Offices Seek Attorneys to Meet Growing Demand for Legal Services

by Patrick Costello

Every month the number of Idaho citizens who visit a Court Assistance Office continues to grow. With the number of CAO patrons increasing dramatically, the CAOs are seeking more attorneys to include on their referral rosters, especially because the first priority of Idaho Court Assistance Offices is to connect self-represented litigants with attorneys whenever possible.

Idahoans turned to CAOs for help 12,722 times in 2001, up from 5,500 contacts the preceding year. During the first half of 2002 the usage rate continued to increase to nearly 10,000 and should reach more than 20,000 visits by the end of this year.

The Court Assistance Office project maintains a roster of attorneys in each judicial district who are willing to accept referrals from the CAOs. The roster is posted on the CAO website (www2.state.id.us/cao) as well as in each CAO office.

Background of the Court Assistance Project

Sponsored by the Idaho Supreme Court, the University of Idaho College of Law, and the host counties, the CAO is a clearinghouse for an array of consumer information and referral for legal assistance for those seeking access to the courts. Most CAO patrons (almost 70%) came to the offices for assistance with family law cases last year.

The first five Idaho Court Assistance Offices opened on a pilot basis in July 1999. In the past 18 months new CAO offices have been established in Bonner, Kootenai, Nez Perce, and Cassia Counties. This brings to 26 the number of counties that now have CAO's. The offices serve patrons from surrounding counties as well as residents of their host counties. The Idaho Supreme Court's Committee to Increase Access to the Courts, chaired by Fourth District Judge Joel Horton, has set a goal to have trained court assistance officers providing services in all 44 county courthouses by July, 2003.

Idahoans can access CAO services in person or through the project's website. Thanks to an IOLTA grant from the Idaho Law Foundation, many of the court forms available will soon be in an interactive format. The grant will also provide an on-line child support calculator on the CAO website in the near future.

Services are available to all, regardless of income. However, of those who reported their income in 2001, more than half (54%) were below the federal poverty level (\$17,650 for a family of 4). Only seven percent were above "modest means" (225% of the poverty level, or \$39,712 for a family of 4).

CAOs made 2,870 referrals last year. Of these:

- 42% of these referrals were to private attorneys;
- 11% were to the Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program;
- 4% were to Idaho Legal Aid Services;
- 3% were to the Idaho State Bar Modest Means Panel;
- 4% were to mediators; and

- 7% were to the Idaho Law Foundation "Legal Resource Line," a telephone service for general legal advice.

In 2001 the Idaho Legislature enacted §32-1402(5), I.C., which established Court Assistance Offices as part of a system of coordinated family services in Idaho courts. The legislature also provided funds to support Court Assistance Offices in each of the state's seven judicial districts. The legislation requires an annual evaluation of the CAO project as part of the Supreme Court's Family Court Services evaluation.

The first such evaluation report was submitted to the Idaho Legislature by the court last January. That report stated: "Over 98% [of CAO patrons] report the information provided by the office was helpful; 94% reported the information provided by the office helped to increase their satisfaction with the court process. Nearly all of those completing the survey said they would return for assistance in the future if necessary. In addition, court personnel rated the offices as very useful and beneficial to the court process."

How to be included on the CAO Roster

If you would like to be included on the CAO attorney roster please complete the questionnaire that accompanies this article, and FAX or mail it to the project director. The form can also be downloaded from the CAO website and then submitted by e-mail or FAX.

For more information on the Court Assistance Office Project, please contact:

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Director, Court Assistance Office Project
University of Idaho College of Law
P.O. Box 2321
Moscow, Idaho 83844-2322
Phone: (208) 885-7077
FAX: (208) 885-4628
E-mail: costello@uidaho.edu

ATTORNEY SURVEY

Yes, I would like to be added to the Court Assistance Office roster

Name: _____ Name of firm: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____ E-mail: _____

Types of cases in which I am willing to provide services:

- Divorce (with children without children)
- Paternity
- Parenting plan agreement/modification
- Child support modification
- Contempt (parenting plan or child support agreement)
- Other (please describe): _____

- Separation agreements
- Protection orders
- Name change
- Adoption
- Wills/Probate

Types of services I am interested in providing:

- Document preparation
- Unbundled services
- Document review
- Limited representation (please describe): _____
- Advice and consultation
- Other (please describe): _____

Education _____ I have been practicing law for _____ years

Legal training and experience _____

Yes, I carry professional liability insurance (please list limit): _____

States in which I am licensed to practice law: _____

My office is: accessible to the disabled not accessible to the disabled (list barriers): _____

I am fluent in these foreign languages: _____

Geographical range in which I am willing to work: _____

My fees are: _____

Yes, I am willing to reduce my rates or serve pro bono for low-income individuals

Yes, I am willing to provide brief consultations at no cost

Yes, I am willing to provide unbundled services (work with clients on particular aspects of their case only)

Name of person completing form: _____

I UNDERSTAND THAT MY NAME MAY BE REMOVED FROM THE COURT ASSISTANCE OFFICE ROSTER IN THE EVENT OF DISCIPLINARY ACTION TAKEN AGAINST ME BY THE BAR, MY FAILURE TO MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL LIABILITY INSURANCE, OR BY ENTERING A MATERIAL MISREPRESENTATION OF FACT ON THIS SURVEY.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please return to:

Court Assistance Office Project
University of Idaho College of Law
P.O. Box 442321
Moscow, Idaho 83844-2321

OR FAX to (208)-885-4628
OR e-mail to costello@uidaho.edu

SERVICES PROVIDED AT THE COURT ASSISTANCE OFFICES:

- Information on the risks of self-representation
- Information on attorneys and types of services they can provide (i.e., pro bono and reduced rate representation, unbundled services)
- Referral to mediators
- Application for direct legal services for low-income individuals (i.e., Idaho Legal Aid Services, Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program)
- Toll-free Legal Resource Line for brief legal consultations (operated by the Idaho Law Foundation), domestic violence hotline (through Idaho Legal Aid Services) and legal research line (from the Idaho State Law Library)
- Information on services provided by government and private agencies
- Court forms and instructions for some types of civil cases, with an emphasis on family law
- Review of completed court forms
- Written instructions on how to proceed with many types of civil cases, including which forms to use and how to fill them out
- Use of computers to prepare court documents, and research and access other Internet resources
- Informational brochures and pamphlets on a variety of legal topics, organizations and agencies
- Information on pro se litigation workshops sponsored by Idaho Legal Aid Services and Idaho Volunteer Lawyers Program
- Information and referral to resources to protect children in high-conflict cases (e.g. visitation supervisors)
- Instructional videos, with accompanying brochures on topics including an introduction to the court system, family law, and domestic violence
- Workshops on obtaining a divorce, and on modifying and enforcing divorce or custody decrees
- **CAO Website to access and download court forms, instructions, and other CAO resources** (<http://www2.state.id.us/cao/>).

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